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Cuba's Creative Renaissance: The Artists and Spaces Shaping Havana Today

The 15th Havana Biennial unites global and Cuban artists in a citywide celebration of contemporary art, culture, and community dialogue.

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Last November, the 15th edition of the **Bienal de la Habana**, entitled “Shared Horizons,” opened at sites across **Havana**. The presentation, commemorating 40 years of the **Biennial**’s history since its founding in 1984, foregrounded artists from Latin America and the Caribbean, with a dual focus on community engagement and the tenuous coexistence between humankind and the natural world. By design, **visitors** were encouraged to immerse themselves in the daily flow of the city as they experienced the artworks and installations on view.

Discover Havana-Based Artist Wilfredo Prieto



Estudio Wilfredo Prieto, Vaso de agua medio lleno, 2006, Vaso de cristal y agua 12 x 9 cm ø; Courtesy of Estudio Wilfredo Prieto.

Of special note in this respect is *El Fanguito*, Havana-based artist **Wilfredo Prieto**'s interactive, site-specific installation. Situated in the Barrio El Fanguito, located across the Almendares River from the artist's studio, the installation comprised more than 50 works created between 2006 and 2024 that were spread across 47 sites around the Barrio. Over half of these sites were realized in private homes, turning the neighborhood into a living museum with its inhabitants serving as willing docents and activation partners. Visitors received a bilingual handout designed to replicate a neighborhood newspaper. Its contents featured a curator's statement and an index of the individual artworks and their respective locations that infused a festive, scavenger hunt vibe to the experience. The humble abodes of the residents paired with the often almost imperceptible yet poetic art objects within emphasized the intimacy of engagement and the capacity for creative inspiration in the mundane.

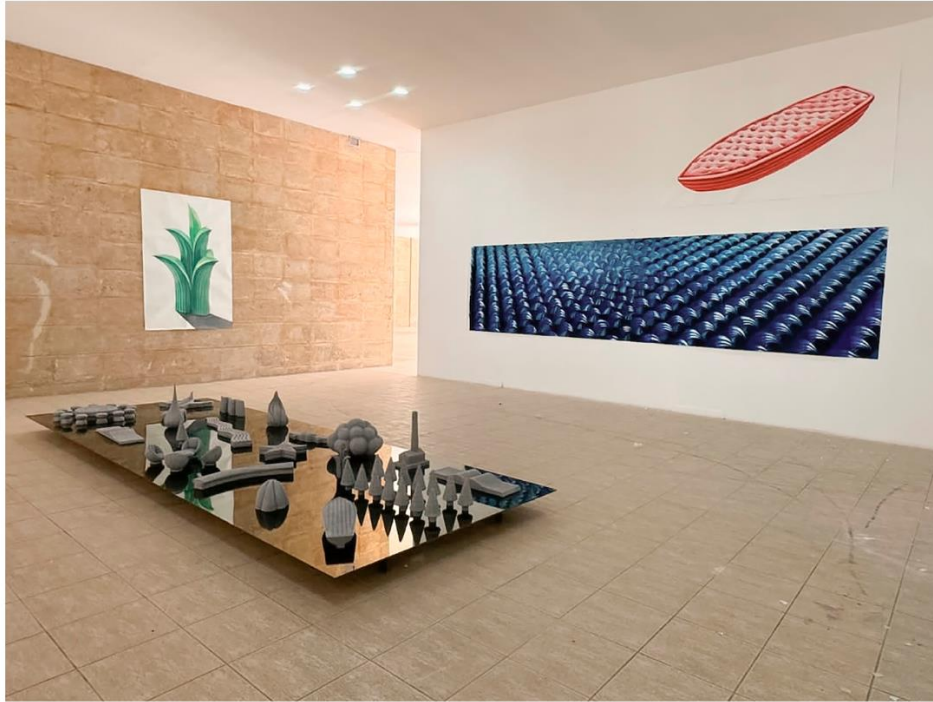
A memorable activation was *Glass Half Full* (2006), literally consisting of a half full glass of water, installed within the context of a kitchen counter shrine that also included effigies of a Black Virgin Mary holding a white baby Jesus, a crucifix in a glass of water, and various Santeria urns and other accoutrements. The hostess patiently and enthusiastically detailed the meaning behind each object on her makeshift altar that—when taken in toto—illuminates the complex cross-cultural nuances embedded in Cuban culture and speaks to the

power of faith in all its forms. Prieto's interventions prompted a heightened level of perception, poignant self-awareness, and opportunities for meaningful connection.

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In the words of one resident, “This opens our minds, teaches us to think and interpret the work, and then try to explain what we understood to the people who come to the neighborhood” (Yalena Gonzalez. “El Fanguito: a contemporary art museum,” *Fanguito*, November 29, 2024, p. 11.). El *Fanguito* is a poetic testament to the power of art not only to inspire but also to encourage meaningful dialogue and connection, thus engendering transformation from both a personal and societal perspective.

**Vibrant Museo Nacional de Bellas
Artes de Cuba (MNBA)
Exhibitions**



Courtesy of Esterio Segura.

Conversely, a group of exhibitions at the **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Cuba (MNBA)** offered a whirlwind tutorial on the sweeping arc of modern and contemporary Cuban art across its two campuses, with a welcome focus on women artists. At the museum's **Palacio de Bellas Artes** building, visitors first encountered an ambitious monographic presentation of recent works by the Cuban artist **Esterio Segura**. His fanciful 2016 sculpture *Hybrid of a Chrysler: A Provocation to Fly*, a souped up 1953 **Chrysler Windsor** limousine equipped with the wings of an airplane greeted visitors at the entrance, followed by an open-air rotunda filled with a compelling index of Segura's humorous and sometimes biting socio-politically infused symbology transposed across painting, sculpture, and installation.

Upstairs, the museum dedicated two exhibitions to women painters. “Los vaivenes de la historia. Mujeres abstractas de los 50 (The ups and downs of history. Abstract women of the 50s),” curated by **Roberto Cobas** and **Yahíma Marina Rodríguez**, featured the work of six leading Cuban postwar women artists: **Mirta Cerra, Carmen Herrera, Gina Pellón, Caridad Ramírez, Zilia Sánchez, and Loló Soldevilla**. The range and rigor of their works across modes of abstraction including Concrete art and Minimalist art emphasized the cosmopolitanism of Cuban artists at midcentury and their contributions to the global shift from representation to abstraction.

The artistic audacity of this group of women serves as a precursor to “Delirium Termens,” a daring survey of **Rocío García**’s fetishistic and psychologically charged paintings from 1985 to 2024, curated by **Corina Matamoros**. Vibrating with color, García’s fever dreams evoke the patterning and palette of Matisse, the cynicism of the Neue Sachlichkeit, and the grotesque sadomasochism of Makoto Aida.

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A third exhibition presented in the MNBA’s Palacio del Centro Asturiano entitled “La Tradicion se Rompe Pero Cuesta (Tradition is broken but It’s Hard)” featured a group of 17 women from across the Caribbean including: **Alida Martínez** (Aruba); **Annalee Davis, Joscelyn Gardner** (Barbados); **Belkis Ayón, Lisandra Ramírez Bernal, María Magdalena Campos-Pons** (Cuba); **Raquel Paiewonsky** (Dominican Republic); **Tabita Rezaire** (French Guiana); **Joëlle Ferly, Guy Gabon** (Guadeloupe); **Barbara Prézeau** (Haiti), **Gisela Colón, Anaida Hernández, Elsa María Meléndez** (Puerto Rico); **Jeannette Ehlers, Jaime Lee Loy** (Trinidad and Tobago); and **La Vaughn Belle** (Virgin Islands). Curated by **José Manuel Noceda** and *Jorge Fernández*, the exhibition tackled timely issues relating to gender, race, colonialism, climate change, historical memory and power. A standout was **Tabita Rezaire’s** chilling

installation *Sugar Walls Teardom*, 2016, a tribute to the Black female slaves who became unwitting guinea pigs to the gruesome experiments of **Dr. Marion Sims**, the “father of modern gynecology,” in the name of science.

Showcasing the Sophistication of the Contemporary Havana Art Scene



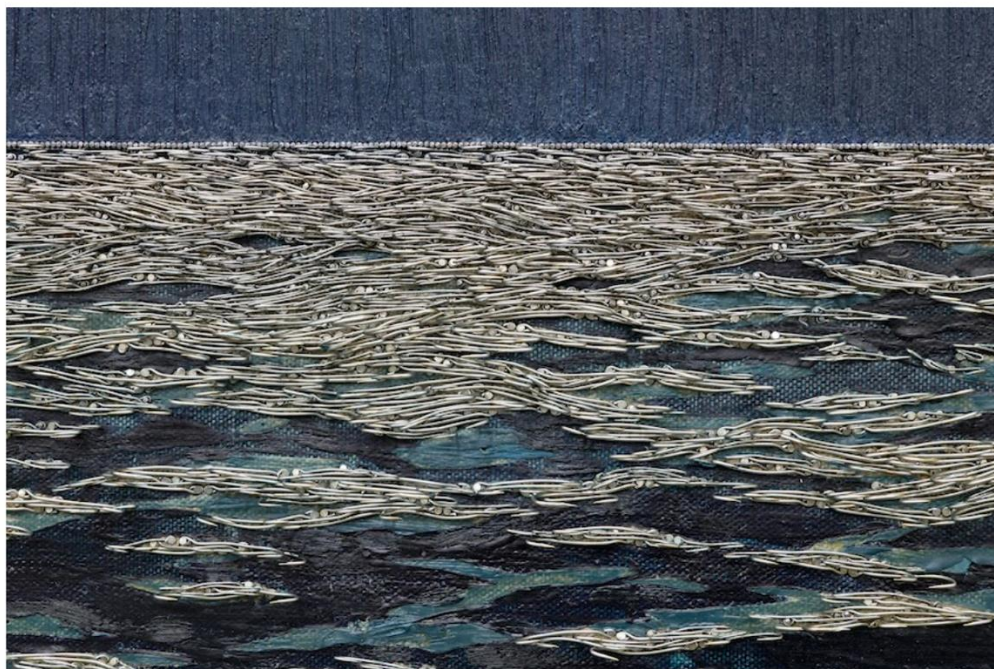
Michel Pérez Pollo – Pascale Marthine Tayou, “Vidas Paralelas” 2022, exhibition view at Galleria Continua / Habana, photo by Nestor Kim, courtesy of the artists and GALLERIA CONTINUA.

Aside from the official Biennial venues, there were many collateral exhibitions that showcased the sophistication and breadth of the contemporary Havana art scene. Many of these presentations were contextualized in repurposed spaces from the city’s glorious architectural past. These architectural interventions reflect an admirable resourcefulness and innovative vision for Havana’s cultural future. The Havana outpost of **Galleria Continua**, housed in a refurbished 1930s-era cinema in the heart of Chinatown and run by **Niurma Pérez Zerpas**, featured a two-person exhibition of **Alejandro**

Campins and **Gabriel Cisneros**. The drama of their respective meditations on the power of symbolic public places and monuments was effectively amplified by the theatrical setting. The gallery itself is a neighborhood landmark, identifiable by the **Daniel Buren** site-specific installation *Right on Target* (2020), permanently affixed to the façade. Similarly, the recently opened **LÍNEA Arte Contemporáneo** art space is striking for its context within a partially refurbished turn-of-the-20th-century mansion.

Another collateral exhibition, “To the Root. Identities in Question,” curated by **Sandra García Herrera**, was installed in a former nunnery and showcased 13 internationally based emerging artists working across mediums. The juried presentation was supported by **Salón Blanco**, **Fondo de Arte Joven**, and the Panama-based **Los Carbonell Foundation**, founded by the philanthropist **Nivaldo Carbonell**. Originally a cooking oil factory built in 1910, La Fábrica de Arte Cubano was a revelation—a dynamic, multimedia, multilevel art factory teeming with a cross-section of Cuban society. Opened in 2014 by a group of artists under the direction of local musician **X Alfonso**, this vibrant alternative nightlife platform offers a mind-boggling menu of rotating contemporary art installations, live concerts, movie screenings, and dance sessions until the wee hours of the night.

The Entrepreneurial Spirit of Havana-Based Artists



Yoan Capote, "Isla (liminal) (detail)," 2025, Óleo, encáustica, puntillas y anzuelos de pesca sobre yute montado en panel de madera, 200 x 300 x 12cm, courtesy of the artist.

An unrelenting tenacity and an entrepreneurial spirit are admirable qualities that define many Havana-based artists. The vivacious artist and Biennale veteran, **José Capaz**, embodies this ethos in spades. In addition to his ambitious artistic practice, he is co-founder and owner of the boutique **Hotel Elvira, mi amor**, located in the Havana Vieja neighborhood. This quaint art-filled gem was built in the 1920s as a private residence and is part of the Old Havana UNESCO World Heritage site. Capaz's studio, once a palatial

mansion, is filled with room after room of surreal paintings of grand proportions that often extend beyond one's peripheral vision. His dynamic compositions take the viewer on a psychedelic journey that alternately considers the origins of life and the limitless expanse of the universe.

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Another rising talent on the global art stage is the formidable Havana-born artist **Yoan Capote**. The cerebral rigor of his ideas is equally matched by the formal mastery of his execution. Capote's sublime seascapes, painstakingly rendered in fishing hooks crafted from repurposed barbed wire, are poignant ruminations that alternately consider the tropes of borders, migration, sustainability, and ecological preservation. His psychologically charged sculptures and interactive installations deftly address the anxieties of contemporary life and the complex dichotomy between individual will and the collective.

Capote, Capaz, Prieto, and their contemporaries are internationally recognized artists and active participants on the global circuit of biennales, art fairs, residencies, and museum exhibitions. Their success is supported by a dedicated infrastructure of gallery representation, private and institutional collectors, and foundations like the **Cuban Artists Fund** that rightfully champion the vital and affirming perspectives that continue to thrive amidst the complex yet exhilarating milieu of the avant-garde art circles of Havana. It was heartening to be privy to the inspiring determination, sophisticated vision and generosity of spirit these artists bring to their respective practices. Without a doubt their powerful messages will continue to resonate and shape the trajectory of Cuban art and culture for many more biennial editions to come.



Alejandro González, "Cuba año cero," 2009-2012, Photo by Alejandro González, Courtesy: the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA.