



ART ON THE STREETS OF HAVANA: PUBLIC ART AND POLITICS FROM CHÉ TO TODAY

BY YOLI (YOANNA) TERZIYSKA

I lived in Havana as a child, and still visit frequently. Returning is always marked by relatives, friends, and of course a dose of tourist bliss—rum, beaches, and ruin lust. [1]

Ruin lust comes in large doses in Havana. It seems that after 1959 (Castro's Socialist Revolution), time only began performing in one direction, aging and tearing apart the physical fabric of the city. Familiar images of Havana show vintage American cars that still (as if by miracle!) keep running; photogenic colonial buildings with torn, rotting façades; barefoot children playing baseball with makeshift bats; an elegantly attired man with a cigar in his mouth; and of course Ché. These images of Havana are iconic and timeless—they cannot be attributed to any particular post-revolutionary decade. The time-capsule image conveys a romantic socialist utopia, untouched by capitalist consumption, a place where you can experience the simpler life, before the marketing revolution and the internet.

Yet Havana is anything but still. It is a place of abundant contrasts and movement, captured by contemporary graffiti that embellish the city's decaying buildings.



Yulier Rodriguez, image Dinah Senior, January-April, 2015

Earlier this Autumn, I met some of Havana's contemporary street artists, among them a young neighborhood superstar, Yulier Rodriguez. We spoke at his studio about his work and the art scene in the city. While talking to Rodriguez, I noticed a parallel between the evolution of public art in Havana on the one hand, and Cuba's political climate on the other, from early socialism to today.

Enrique Avila's 36-meter-high sculpture of Ché Guevara adorns the façade of the Museum of the Revolution. It was made in the 70s, a time marked by political and social change, perceived as Cuba's "golden era of socialism." The work was commissioned by the state, depicting one of its most prominent historical figures. Guevara is the icon of Cuban post-1959 identity—he embodies heroism, morality, intellectualism. Avila appropriated Alberto Korda's iconic photograph of the revolutionary, creating the larger-than-life relief with the inscription *Hasta la victoria siempre* (onward toward victory always). The metal structure was erected to remind the Cuban public of its recent history. Notwithstanding its propagandistic purpose, Avila's work became one of Havana's best-known images both inside Cuba and abroad. Crowds of visitors snap pictures of the relief sculpture, and thus reproduce Havana's stereotypical iconography. More than 40 years on, it conveys the same message to the passerby: the positive impact of the revolution.



Image courtesy the author

Public art during the time of Avila's enormous Ché portrait was controlled and commissioned by the state, making its content conceptually and visually limited. Many of these works exist today, falling apart along with Havana's infrastructure. Commonly, the images portray key revolutionary figures like the Castro brothers or Camilo Cienfuegos (seen in another wall relief by Avila). Chipped murals and graffiti by unknown artists exhort phrases such as *Patria o muerte* (Country or death), *Viva la revolución* (Long live the revolution), and *De por vida con Fidel* (With Fidel for life). Avila's suspended Ché and Cienfuegos encapsulate and in some ways petrify time. In this era, public art was socialism's loyal comrade. This essential tool disseminated ideological messages in a manner most palpable to the public: short, powerful statements frequently accompanied by pictures of political personae. This is the Cuba that once was—but that is now rapidly changing.

Today, there are a number of young street artists in the city attempting to create new dialogues, with a new generation of iconic images.



Yulier Rodriguez, image Dinah Senior, January-April, 2015

Yulier Rodriguez lives and works in Havana. His works can be found painted on many walls around the city, from Old Havana's ghettos, to the neighborhoods of Vedado and Miramar. Old Havana is divided into two starkly contrasting areas: the well-preserved touristic quarters and the city's poorest neighborhoods. Rodriguez predominantly paints in the latter, on buildings' decaying façades. Between the peeling paint and missing chunks of concrete emerges a colorful and phantasmagorical world populated by figures (dead and alive) of people, animals, skeletons, and spirits. His work appears politically ambiguous in its message, allowing the artist to produce without agitating the city's police.

Rodriguez states that—like many artists—he paints on the street with the intent to reach the widest audience possible: the people walking through the city, the average passerby. He paints his creatures to express happiness and fear, believing that we all share these basic conditions. Rodriguez also mentions that the city needs color as a distraction from the steady ruination of Havana's architecture. His murals therefore encourage a relationship between the decaying and old, and the contemporary and new. While Avila's work seeks to suspend time with its ideological narratives, Rodriguez faces time squarely: as it passes, it leaves visible scars on crumbling Havana. His graffiti emphasizes this phenomenon—a phenomenon typically romanticized in depictions of Havana abroad—much like images of Ché Guevara and the revolution.



Yulier Rodriguez, image Dinah Senior, January-April, 2015

The buildings Rodriguez chooses to paint were once grand—as seen in their fading colors and pockmarked columns. His artworks plant new life on the city's walls, highlighting the need for a different type of visual language in Cuba now: a language where change is not defined by more ruin. Maybe Rodriguez's art will become Havana's iconic images of the future—images that tell a more nuanced, contemporary narrative.

—Yoli (Yoanna) Terziyska

[1] The German term *Ruinenlust* (ruin lust) was resurrected by Rose Macaulay in her 1953 study, *Pleasure of Ruins*, temporally situating the phenomenon in the modern (post-Medieval) period. She argues that *Ruinenlust* is associated with the pleasure we find in ruins—a pleasure that may derive from the beauty found in desolation and decay, from an imagining of a past (and thus a future), from destruction and the hope for rebirth or from an understanding of the passage of time and the inevitability of death.

(Image at the top: Yulier Rodriguez, image Dinah Senior, January-April, 2015)

Posted by Yoli (Yoanna) Terziyska on 10/20/15

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