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### Cuban revolutionaries

By Caroline Roux

Los Carpinteros talk about art, politics – and bars



Los Carpinteros, Marco Castillo and Dagoberto Rodríguez

Last December in Miami, on a sunny afternoon during Art Basel, Cuban art collective Los Carpinteros turned the elegant terrace of the Cisneros Foundation (one of the city's impressive private collections) into something more like an abattoir. There were blood-splattered walls and workers covered in gore, their hands dripping red. The art world hung out happily among the carnage: the "gore" was a delicious raspberry and pomegranate cake popular in Havana, called *brazo gitano*, or "gypsy's arm" – a sweet sticky facsimile of a bloody flayed limb. Such macabre confectionery appealed to Los Carpinteros, whose predilection for multiple meanings and shifting function underpins much of their work.

This year, the pair will have a more sustained presence at the fair. A slatted plywood structure of their design will crouch on the oceanfront next to Collins Park, its apertures framing the activity inside like hundreds of moving mini-artworks. This time it's a musical

instrument, the *güiro* – originally made from a hollowed-out gourd – that has inspired its shape.

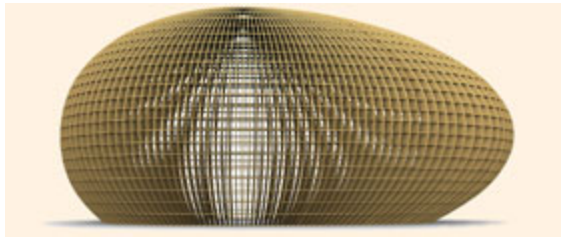
“It’s the most public thing we’ve ever done,” say Marco Castillo, one half of Los Carpinteros, as we sit in the artists’ Madrid studio (for two years, they have lived between Spain and Cuba). “A container, a volume, that can be filled with books, a bar, objects, music ... and people. It’s a sculpture, but with functionality.”

The “Güiro” promises to be a focal point of Miami Art Basel’s social as well as artistic programme, not least because it’s sponsored by Absolut Vodka. But it is conceived as a total artwork, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, from the objects on its many shelves to its bespoke soundtrack by Mallorcan Joan Valent. With its elegant organic lines and nightly entertainment, it should bring Los Carpinteros plenty of attention – of all sorts. “The people from the city government have mentioned that there might be a manifestation against Castro because we’re Cuban artists,” says Dagoberto Rodríguez, the other half of the partnership. “Cubans living in Cuba aren’t always welcomed by some Cubans living in Miami.”

Los Carpinteros, both in their early forties, are of the generation who want to remain (at least part-time) in Cuba to see in the changes that will come. They are also of the generation that benefited from art world interest in the 1990s, when tourism was encouraged to offset the loss of Soviet support. Their fusion of architecture, design, sculpture and paintings has since been assiduously collected in the US, Latin America and Europe. They are superstars in their home town too. “People come up to them continually in Havana,” says their New York gallerist Sean Kelly.

I imagine they deal with it well. As artists go, they are friendly, charming and funny. When asked who takes on which artistic duty, Rodríguez says: “When we started making art together 20 years ago, we used to divide the functions. Now it’s impossible to separate the things; the ideas come from our shared discussion.” Castillo adds: “We’re a collective, and together we create one personality. People often don’t even remember our individual names. We’re not The Beatles.”

The name Los Carpinteros (The Carpenters) cleverly suggests that their work is all about making lovely things rather than communicating darker, more political ideas. It also relates to their formal training at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, where painting, drawing and making had to be mastered, as well as to Cuba itself, where, says Rodríguez, “There is nothing and everything has to be made from zero.”



'Güiro', the artbar

Kelly first exhibited their work in 2008, when a fantastically elongated pink bed called “La Montana Rusa” (“Russian mountain” is the Cuban name for rollercoaster) twisted through his Chelsea gallery. (The influence of surrealism is scattered through their work, along with dadaism and constructivism.) “It was typical of their work –

unnerving, dramatic,” says Kelly. “It walks the line between the veiled and the literal, and you see in it what you will.” Only Rodríguez could attend the opening. His Spanish parentage allows him a US visa, so far denied to Castillo. Whether Castillo will yet make it to Miami, where Kelly is showing new sculptures by the pair, is still unknown.

The first sculpture to be completed is dominating the Madrid studio when I visit, a vast, exuberant starburst made of 40,000 pieces of red Lego, a scaled-down recreation of a *spemuluk*, the arrogantly useless monuments that the Soviet Union scattered across the communist world. “We wanted to create something that connected with our childhood,” Rodríguez says.

The state of Cuba is all over their work: in depictions of emptied swimming pools, for example. Fidel Castro decommissioned all pools as symbols of pre-communist hedonism, and Cubans have since used them for anything from storage to animal rearing. “Politics can torture the functionality of an object,” says Castillo. “There was a moment when all the police stations were turned into schools. And look at Havana – a fancy city occupied by poor people. We live in beautiful apartments destined for a different social class.”

The “Güiro” emerges from the exploration of a building type that has preoccupied Los Carpinteros. “In 2010 we started developing a project based on the panopticon prisons prevalent at the end of the 19th century,” says Rodríguez. “We took the panopticon form but made a library. We substituted a space created for humans with books and data and the reader has the same physical access to every book; it’s the most privileged position.” The idea has been expanded to create the “Güiro”. “It’s something with tremendous ambiguity,” says Castillo. “And,” says Rodríguez, “we like that.”

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