

HOTSPOT

Cuba Libre

As the country opens its doors to the world, its burgeoning art scene is ripe to be discovered. LYDIA BELL visits the galleries and the homes of Havana's 'rock star' artists and finds an artistic community exploding with talent

Photography by Tom Parker

It is well past midnight on a balmy Havana night and the queues for the Arts Factory are snaking around the block. The crowd shows no signs of impatience – this generation has grown up waiting. Inside this thriving, labyrinthine gallery and performance space carved out of a former peanut-oil plant, with its mix of inside and al-fresco bars, hordes of the young and the beautiful congregate. They dance, drink, carouse and embrace, amid a backdrop of ever-changing local and international fine art and photography. If it wasn't for the rowdy, blunt-ended Cuban Spanish coursing through the air, this could be any buzzing, post-industrial hipster rendezvous from Berlin to Brooklyn. It's a curious marker of the cultural and political shifts that have been taking place in this charismatic, closed society.

The Cuban art scene has been vibrant for years, partly because Castro's government has always elevated culture. Also, when Cuba's artists joined the international art market in the 1990s, a successful artist quickly made more than a neurosurgeon. But, until a few years ago, nowhere like the Arts Factory existed in Havana. It was X Alfonso, a high-profile Cuban hip-hop and afro-rock musician – born into a family of Cuban music royalty as the son of Carlos Alfonso and Ele Valdes of the legendary band Síntesis – who hustled the Ministry of Culture to create the Fábrica de Arte Cubano. A hybrid-funded 'community' project, it is classified as neither a state-run nor a private affair. It occupies government land but follows its own agenda. This ambiguous, self-policing status is the case for almost every worthwhile, interesting artistic project in the country. >

Nothing is straightforward on this island, whether it's where you stay, drink or see art. To find the best Cuban fine art, you need a rainmaker, like Susette Martinez, whose deep knowledge and prolific connections make her an excellent back-pocket connoisseur. Linked with the 'rock

stars' of Cuban art such as Roberto Diago, Yoan Capote, Kcho and Roberto Fabelo, she also has an eye for the up-and-comers. She can educate you in the finer points of the Kafka-esque dealer scene and deliver a juicy potted history, from its colonial genesis to present-day machinations.

She can open the doors, for instance, to the restored mansion of Ella Fontanals-Cisneros, who lives between Havana and Miami, where she established the prestigious Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, which collects Latin American art. It's a sign of the changed times that she has been allowed to rent from the government and restore a palatial state-owned home in Siboney, the diplomatic quarter. Her study, sitting room, hall and upstairs bedrooms are populated with significant Cuban art from the Vanguardia era onwards and wonderful pieces, ranging from the likes of Sandú Darié to the darling of the contemporary Cuban art world, Juan Roberto Diago Durruthy.

As for where to stay, with Cuban-American money (and other exile remittances) sluicing into the country, a select few upmarket villas have now been unveiled. But these remain in extremely short supply and word of new developments spreads quickly. One of the best is El Castillo, in the leafy quarter of Miramar. Acquired by a Miami-based Cuban, it had been partitioned into apartments for eight families. Now the chateau-style folly, built by a Spanish count in the 1930s, has reverted to a lavish five-bedroom house with a pool.

Within the same neighborhood is Ydalgo Martinez's three-bedroom suburban home, Casa Cañaveral, which comes with a lush garden, a pool and an abundance of contemporary Cuban art. When Martinez – a returnee who worked for Bally in Switzerland – acquired the house there was a mango tree growing in the bathroom. Now it has Holguin-marble floors, Italian ceramic bathrooms and art deco furniture. Martinez, with his crisp white shirts and good English is supremely efficient, but also exceedingly good company on a wild night out if you want to see in the dawn. He was the first casa owner to offer guests Nespresso machines, airport transfers, massages, laundry, salsa lessons and concierge services as standard.

Without any existing service industry, florists, cleaners, mixologists, security, even people to open and close shutters have to be found and trained up. Nothing is easy, and nothing is cheap – this is a country that levies a tax on Champagne so hefty that you are unlikely to encounter French bubbles anywhere. But the best >

villa concierges here know how to hang a painting to cover the holes in the plaster and will book their clients vintage cars (you can even order the car owned by the ousted dictator Fulgencio Batista's wife, which was dusted off a few years ago). They can also order in cigar rollers and the best musicians to up the ante for a private party.

It follows that someone like the caterer Abel, who can get his hands on Nutella and proper bacon, is worth his weight in gold. Known only to the local diplomatic community and a handful of tailor-made travel specialists like **Black Tomato**, he does sit-down dinners, snack boxes, in-flight tiffins, light lunches and picnics. Another stalwart is Alberto, who returned from working in Michelin-starred restaurants in Germany and Italy fired up with a passion to revive the lost Cuban art of bread making, which has been destroyed by the state bread delivered to Cubans gratis. He had to lug in quantities of seeds and grains in his luggage to kick-start his business. Such is entrepreneurial life here.

Most of Havana's better properties are found in the sprawling, handsome, Republican-era neighborhood of Vedado. By the 1950s, the quarter had become the emblem of America's command of Cuba. Here were the commercial enterprises, neon-lit cinemas, cultural and intellectual institutions and dream homes that signified Havana's economic and emotional shift from Spanish outpost to North American satellite. Because of the dearth of new building since the 1959 revolution, in some ways Vedado has been preserved as if in aspic. In other ways, it bears little resemblance to what it was. Grander houses are bedecked with tropical vegetation, still charming, but choked by roots and creepers, while salty air and hurricane rain have gnawed at façades. The American-born collector-cum-curator Pamela Ruiz has rescued one such architectural beauty from rack and ruin. Together with her Cuban-artist husband, Damián Aquiles, she has transformed the space: high ceilings usher in tropical breezes; spacious rooms with church-like door heights cascade off a central corridor; enormous windows look onto a lush garden of fossil, dwarf and coconut palms; neo-classical doors are still paneled in 1940s wallpaper; and many incarnations of paint are revealed in the mottled beauty of the stucco walls.

For this couple, this is not so much their home as an extension of their selves. It serves as a living art gallery, and during the Biennale, which takes place from May to June, Aquiles's work is joined by other big names in Cuban art. Ruiz is the city's ultimate mover and shaker whose recent projects include co-producing the Annie Leibovitz portrait of Rihanna, shot in Havana last fall for *Vanity Fair*. Having established herself as Havana's foremost salonista, she has given her project of making connections between Cubaphiles a name – *Cuba Untitled*. Simply put, if you're not at one of Ruiz's soirées during your inaugural visit to Havana, you haven't really arrived. The designer

Tory Burch, the organizers of Sundance, the former speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, mayor of Chicago Rahm Emanuel (chief of staff for Obama in the first administration), Visionaire co-founder Cecilia Dean and a roll call of international gallerists have all rubbed shoulders here. "Travel is about meeting people," Ruiz says. "Havana is photogenic and fantastic, but it's not about the Malecón [the city's iconic esplanade], it's about who you meet on the Malecón."

The couple take me to their new project – a 10,000 sq ft disused candy factory in working-class Cerro on the outskirts of Havana, which is being transformed into a studio for Aquiles and other artists, and an exhibition and community space. They want the space to act as a bridge between Cuba and the outside world. "Cuba is enough of an island," says Aquiles. "I want to foster dialogue between our artists and students and the outside world."

In this land of rapacious creative talent, they are not the only people bent on connecting Cuba with a wider world. This is a season of prodigal returns. Ballet star Carlos Acosta, currently on a farewell tour, plans to replace his classical repertoire day job with running a contemporary dance company in Havana. We meet at the derelict 1962 Vittorio Garatti-designed domes at the Instituto Superior de Artes on the city's periphery, where he wants the center to be located, an eerily beautiful spot, where our voices and footsteps bounce off the damp, graffiti-covered walls. The dance company will, he dreams, build a balletic bridge between Cuba and the rest of the world. Cuban dancers, need – and have been denied – the lifeblood of global influences and influencers. "They are technically brilliant but isolated from current thinking," he says. It is the retirement dream of a Habanero who grew up in poverty.

For all its art and dance, you cannot come to Cuba and ignore music – it is a part of life. To drink at its potent, mystical source, you need to travel east, to Santiago de Cuba, which, as it happens, is also home to Cuba's oldest house – the not-to-be-missed, 16th-century Casa de Diego Velázquez museum. In this city, babies wiggle to the rhythm of the batá drums and clave before they can walk, and the street-corner rumba is alive and well. At the Casa de los Tradiciones, where elderly couples hold each other close and perform quietly flourished salsa on the tiled dance floor, I bump into Harry Follett a British entrepreneur who this year staged a small festival called Manana Cuba, twinning Afro-Cuban Folkloric music with international talents from the worlds of electronica and dubstep. He says there is a huge, young, active music community desperate to connect with the outside world. He is making initial inroads; may he be the first of many. ■

Black Tomato can organize stays at villas El Castillo or Casa Cañaveral, including flights, transfers and unique experiences in Havana, from £3,475 per person; blacktomato.com. To donate to the Carlos Acosta Dance Foundation, visit carlosacostafoundation.org



BLUE NOTES
A local dancer
in costume at
Santiago de Cuba's
School of Rumba