

SHOW US YOUR WALL

The Protest Art of Cuba Finds an Unlikely Champion

By Roslyn Sulcas

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LONDON — In November 2007, Chris von Christerson’s wife, Marina, decided to take him to Cuba for his 60th birthday. Just before leaving, Mr. von Christerson mentioned to an acquaintance that he was heading to Havana. “You must meet my aunt and uncle,” she said. When the couple arrived at their hotel, a message awaited. Lucha and Orlando Hernández were coming to fetch them.

“They took us to their home, which was pretty humble but with the most amazing art completely covering all the walls,” Mr. von Christerson, a South African-born, London-based mining entrepreneur, recalled during a recent interview. Mr. Hernández, it turned out, was a former curator of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana and a prominent writer, critic and poet. He explained to his guests that he was particularly interested in the protest art of Cuba in the 1990s, when the government relaxed some control over artists.

“For the first time, they were able to express religious feeling, which had been banned in an atheist system,” Mr. von Christerson said. “The other strong theme that emerged was racism, which is alive and well in Cuba even today.” These themes resonated strongly for Mr. von Christerson. “Having lived through apartheid, I found the art similarly evocative and powerful, but also amusing and full of satire,” he said.

No one, he discovered, had put together a comprehensive collection of contemporary Afro-Cuban art. “Why don’t we do that?” he asked Mr. Hernández. They shook hands on a deal: Mr. Hernández would source the work, and Mr. von Christerson would pay for it.

Today, the collection, which includes drawings, paintings, photography, sculpture, video and textiles, consists of around 450 works by 41 artists. A large portion of the collection was featured in “Without Masks,” an exhibition at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes earlier this year. But plenty of the work is still at the couple’s home here, where Mr. von Christerson pointed out favorite pieces and talked about putting the collection together. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

You made a sudden decision to start collecting contemporary Afro-Cuban art, when you barely knew the country. Did you ever think, what have I gotten myself into?

No. From the first conversation with Orlando, when he told me how the slaves brought religion, the bedrock of their survival, to Cuba, and how African religious practices are still current there today, I was convinced this was an important artistic movement.

Did Mr. Hernández choose most of the art, or was it collaborative?

Orlando never dictated. Marina and I had a lot of input, and he never bought a piece without showing it to me. When choosing pieces, we’d often go to the artists’ homes. Some are friends today.

Did you have a budget?

Not really, although I had something vaguely in mind, which I have far exceeded. But there is such good art here, available for very good prices. I don’t think there are many countries in which someone like me could afford to build a collection of such excellent quality.

What was it like to take some of the collection back to Cuba for “Without Masks”?

It was not always simple, but thrilling in the end. An old actor came up to me at the opening and said, “For the first time, we are able to talk about these issues freely: religion, race, the feelings of everyday people.” I realized that is how it must have been for black people in South Africa, being able to speak freely for the first time.

Tell me about some of your favorite pieces here.

I love the René Peña photographs of his own body. You often see just his skin or nostrils or lips, and there is often white contrasting against blackness. It’s audacious, and yet cheekily humorous, too. Another artist whose work I never tire of looking at is Belkis Ayón, who sadly committed suicide at a young age. She used a form of printing, collography, on rough heavy paper, an old tradition that is hardly used today. And Juan Roberto Diago Durruthy’s “Tu Lugar (Your place)” is one of the first pieces we bought in Cuba. Orlando told us we had chosen well, and today Roberto is very successful in Cuba.

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