

PostEverything

Yes, Cuba is more open now. But for these artists and activists, little has changed.

Oppression, jail and censorship are still the norm for the country's young and politically active.



By Kevin Lees June 22

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HAVANA — Tania Bruguera's work sits in the permanent collection of Cuba's premier art gallery, the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. So it was a surprise when, despite invitations from organizers of the Havana Biennial, Bruguera was turned away by the guards there during an event taking place on the Biennial's first weekend.

Far less surprising was the arrest of Gorki Águila, a punk rocker who unfurled a banner at the Museo Nacional demanding the release of political satirist Danilo Maldonado Machado, known as "El Sexto." Machado has been incarcerated since last December after producing a series of provocative political cartoons and antigovernment street art.

Though it no longer throws dissidents in the infamous UMAP labor camps of the 1970s, Cuba has historically arrested and detained activists, including artists. But when Obama took the first steps of normalizing relations with Cuba last year, he promised that diplomats would demand an end to all that. Last December, the president straightforwardly said his policy is "fundamentally about freedom and openness," and it intends to "create more opportunities for the American and Cuban people." The New York Times, 13 days later, extolled the country's burgeoning art scene.

The Biennial, an art exhibition that began in 1984 that highlights Latin American and Caribbean art and nontraditional artists globally, was a chance to showcase a new, freer Cuba. In a recent Associated Press article, art critic Rafael Acosta de Arriva raved about the event as a "moment of major effervescence," capturing the sense that now is the time to "discover" Cuba, artists and all — and at valuable prices.

For some of the country's artists, not much has changed. In the last several weeks, Bruguera, Águila and dozens of other artists, activists and dissidents have been detained, and there's no sign that the political rapprochement has brought any corresponding détente. It's one reason why young Cubans may be so skeptical about closer relations between the United States and Cuba, at least according to an informal poll on a recent hopping Saturday night along Havana's sociable Malecón. They are excited about improved U.S. relations, young Cubans told me, but they doubt that will necessarily deliver any real change. A more formal Univision/Fusion poll in early April showed that although 97 percent of all Cubans support greater ties with the United States, fully 55 percent of Cubans want to live in another country, 70 percent want to start their own business, 75 percent thought they had to be careful about expressing opinions in public and 79 percent are still dissatisfied with Cuba's economic system, and the numbers were even higher among young Cubans. The gap between American froth and Cuban reality at this year's Biennial warns that the pace of change will be

stubborn.

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News coverage since December paints a rosy tapestry of a country on the brink of a Western-style revolution. Netflix announced it would target Cuba, though Internet access is heavily censored, available for \$10 an hour at designated government-run Internet cafes, universities and tourist hotels. JetBlue announced grandiose plans to launch a commercial nonstop flight from New York by year's end; hopes to reestablish a ferry service from Key West followed.

State Department officials say that the U.S. government's new policy represents a bet that liberalization and modernity will drag Cuba into the 21st century and empower Cuban entrepreneurs. The Cuban government, instead, is betting it can open its economy without its politics, press or Internet.

Bruguera fears Cuba could soon become the worst of Castro-style socialism and American-style capitalism at the expense of the Cuban people.

"Money is not going to solve Cuba," she said. "People can actually live their fantasy in Cuba. But because of that, because the government knows that, and because the government is providing that, it's giving the key to access that kingdom to anyone who is going to behave well. And that counts for foreigners, for businessmen, for foreign press, for artists, anybody."

She would know. In May, Bruguera was arrested following a 100-hour reading of Hannah Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism" in her modest home in Havana Vieja, a few footsteps from the national Cuban art collection. When I visited Bruguera for the first time, on the final day of the reading, plainclothes policemen from MININT, Cuba's feared interior ministry, swarmed just outside the doorway, and state workers were jackhammering away, digging forlorn trenches into the dusty road. Bruguera, who once taught art at the University of Chicago, where she also knocked on doors for Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, has been under a kind of "city arrest" since late December, her passport confiscated and every step under state surveillance, following another public demonstration. We made plans to meet, perhaps later that day. Instead, MININT officials detained and questioned her.

Fidel Castro set the rules of the game for artists early on in a 1961 speech at the national library to a gathering of intellectuals: "Within the Revolution everything; against the Revolution, nothing."

Artists like Bruguera may express their views through art — up to a point. Once you fall out of good standing with the government, for any reason, Bruguera said, you're deemed a problem-maker on every front. If Che Guevara were 27 years old and alive in today's Cuba, Bruguera said he'd be in prison, not in power.

It's a touchstone for Cuban society, generally, including the limited economic reforms that Raúl Castro has implemented since 2008. Liberalization, but only up to a point. It's not clear that transformational levels of American capital would even be welcome in a command economy that still features massive state control. In a city of over 2 million, there's still just one major ice cream parlor — Coppelia, a sprawling complex of concrete slathered in teal paint. It serves only three flavors and is closed on Mondays, but the lines stretch around the block to get in on steamy weekend afternoons.

It's one example of dozens that suggests there's ample room for much deeper reform to unleash entrepreneurship. Still, the number of self-employed workers (now more than 500,000, according to the government), and the categories for self-employment, have gradually increased since 2010, offsetting the unprecedented layoffs of nearly one-tenth of the sprawling public workforce that earns a monthly salary of around \$20.

Upcoming transitions could complicate both reform and diplomatic efforts. A fiercely anti-Castro Republican administration in 2017 could use a full embassy as a platform to undermine the Cuban regime in far more severe ways than the current interests section. Meanwhile, Raúl Castro has pledged to step down as president in 2018, though few have credible insights into the true beliefs of his likely successor, 54-year-old Miguel Díaz-Canel. Raúl's son, 49-year-old Alejandro, a top-ranking MININT official, traveled with Raúl to the Summit of the Americas, lingering in the background during the Raúl-Obama handshake. Some Cubans believe he will eventually emerge as the next Castro to rule the island.

For the most doubtful, the United States still beckons. Following Obama's December announcement, the U.S. Coast Guard announced a sharp uptick of seaborne Cubans anxious that reconciliation would end favorable U.S. immigration policy. In the 2012 film "Una Noche," three young Cubans attempt to leave the country on a makeshift raft. A year later, two of the co-stars, Anailín de la Rúa de la Torre and Javier Núñez Florián, decided to stay in Miami en route to a film festival in New York. They fell in love during filming and now live in Las Vegas with their American-born son.

Unlike previous generations of Cuban immigrants, Núñez Florián isn't overly concerned about politics. He said his decision was about building a better future for himself and his family. Though he initially demurred when I asked him about the dynamics of U.S.-Cuban relations, he said he sees it in a positive light.

"Yes, it's good," he said. "The U.S. is meeting in the middle, little by little getting closer to Cuba, and Cuba the same. Little by little everything is changing for the better."