

# Art in America

OCTOBER 2001

**CUBA II**

Sweet Dreams

*The Seventh Havana Biennial addressed the theme of "communication," which many artists interpreted in terms of escape or migration.*

BY GRADY T. TURNER

[...]

## Bringing the World to Havana

Migration was also a recurring theme in the work of non-Cuban artists. In the Biennial's most charming and generous project, Mexican artist Gustavo Artigas distributed Styrofoam airplanes to children who gleefully flew them in the open public space of the Plaza Vieja. Julieta López Aranda, a Mexican-born New Yorker, played upon the anxieties of those who fear air travel with recordings of robotic stewardesses instructing passengers on emergency procedures, heard on headsets that descended from the ceiling like so many dreaded oxygen masks. Rubén Gutiérrez (Mexico) photographed Havana's ubiquitous oval water towers and digitally removed their supports, thus transforming them into UFOs that appear to hover above otherwise commonplace scenes.

For some, the pervasive inquiry into migration was realized as a meditation on the personal costs of leaving home. Alfredo J.D. Aquilizan and María Isabel Gaudínez-Aquilizan, an art team from the Philippines, filled a vault with the prized belongings of Habaneros who had been asked to contribute an indispensable item they would take on a long journey. The results suggested a ragtag yard sale, but for the handwritten notes explaining why each object was so precious to the possessor. Isidro "Sid" Gómez Hildawa, also Filipino, asked dozens of his 20-something compatriots living with their parents to describe and sketch their dream home. The survey results were presented on upright cards in a grid on the gallery floor, creating a schematic suburb of frustrated dreams. "Big" was the most commonly used adjective, but a desire for privacy was the dominant leitmotif among all the fantasy beachfronts and swimming pools.

Today, certain Cuban artists enjoy an unprecedented liberty to travel, but for the remainder, the Biennial brought the world to Havana. Leandro Erlich and Judi Werthein of Argentina invited visitors to pose for Polaroids against a photomural of a ski chalet, on a set equipped with skis and covered with artificial snow. Their installation was generally crowded with uniformed teenage soldiers posing with smiling young women. Members of the architectural firm 3-RW transplanted their native Norway to tropical climes by inserting mural-sized photographs of a Scandinavian living room into a café adjacent to the Centro Wifredo Lam; they also knit sweaters onto the trunks of the palms that surrounded the eatery.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, a Canada-based Mexican artist, gave the Biennial its most truly interactive exhibit: a series of small LED screens attached to posts in the Centro that displayed text typed by visitors on a nearby keyboard (the results were subsequently posted at [www.lozano-hemmer.com](http://www.lozano-hemmer.com)). The sentiments ranged from concern over the fate of the planet to ruminations on the consequences of being gay in Cuba.

The Centro was also host to a video program curated by Euridice Arratia, the highlight of which was *Ballad of Bad Orpheus* by U.S. artist Guy Richards Smit. A witty homage to Rainer Fassbinder's film *Querelle*, the ballad recounts, with all the overwrought bathos of a rock opera, the sad fate of a sailor who can't control his evil nature.

[...]