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Lisa D'Alessandro

Up close and personal

Photographers focus on the people and stories in a changing Cuba

by Rebecca Wallace

The curving, brick Krause Center for Innovation stands high on a grassy hill in the autumn dusk. Foothill College students must watch their footing on a rocky path that leads up to it.

Located next to the school's observatory, the center this fall is similarly a place to glimpse another world that few Americans ever see: Cuba.

In an elegantly lit round art gallery, the new photography exhibition "Cuba in Focus" has just opened. Images by 11 American and seven Cuban photographers, all taken in Cuba, hang together. Bouncy Cuban music plays on a small stereo. The street musicians, fruit markets, boxing gyms and fat 1950s American cars of Cuba add color to the brick walls.

One of the Cuban photographers contributes a particularly vivid sense of history to the show. Perfecto Romero, who was Che Guevara's official photographer, has a black-and-white shot of Guevara, Fidel Castro and their cohorts marching.

The show is the brainchild of Foothill photography-department chair Ron Herman, who's an avid traveler but never revis-

its the same place twice. Except for Cuba. He's already planning his third trip.

Most of the photos in "Cuba in Focus" come from the second photography group trip Herman led to the country, in April. Wide-eyed, his 10 students turned lenses on dancers and musicians, a tobacco farm, the popular Malecón esplanade and seawall, and many other scenes in Havana and elsewhere.

"At first, we were running around frantically shooting. I think I dreamed through a viewfinder for the next month," Palo Alto photographer Mary Bender says.

Then the Americans zoomed in closer, meeting locals and also getting to know a group of Cuban photographers. They went on photo walks together, and the Cubans took them to their homes and told them about the photographer's life there, in a place that's been so separate from the United States for 50 years.

It's difficult to go from world to world, so a nonprofit called Global Exchange made the trip to Cuba easier by helping with vi-

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Mary Bender

Top, the photo "Sugarcane Cart" was shot in Cuba by Lisa D'Alessandro, a business and art consultant who takes Ron Herman's photography class at Foothill College. Above, Palo Alto photographer Mary Bender took this photo, "Salon de Belleza," at a beauty salon where Cuban flags hung right above a picture of Beyoncé.

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Cover Story

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sas and red tape and supplying a guide. Officially, the Americans were there as a professional research delegation, as working photographers.

In turn, the idea of bringing a troupe of Cuban photographers to this country for the Oct. 27 exhibition opening was daunting. Only one came, José Manuel Fors, who has shown in the United States before. But even this one border-crossing was tough, Herman says at the opening.

Tonight, Fors has just come from giving a talk about his life and work to a packed Foothill classroom, where he was enthusiastically applauded. Now, like a rock star, he enters the building and is surrounded by students taking his picture with cell phones.

Inside the gallery, visitors squeeze in shoulder-to-shoulder and gaze at Cuba.

One man pauses at "Blue Taxi," a photo by American photographer Mary Ellen Kaschub that shows a shining vintage car ambling past grandly designed but crumbling buildings, in front of a sea view and clear sky.

"It's like living in a retro world," the man says.

Herman had that kind of open-mouthed curiosity about Cuba, too. A veteran traveler, he became drawn to the country in recent years when he heard that it was becoming more open to visitors and entrepreneurship.

"I felt that there was an urgent need to see it," he said in an interview on campus, chatting with a Weekly reporter and with two of his Palo Alto students, Bender and Robin Lockner.

Herman, who has taught at Foothill since 1997, has led photography trips to Spain, Italy, Ireland, Peru and the Czech Republic. Somehow Cuba got under his skin, and he's taken two groups there, the first in September 2010. Some of his students went on both trips.

Herman did see that Cuba was changing, even between his first and second trips.

"It was more open to free enterprise," he said. "There were people selling things out of the windows of their homes, turning their front room into a beauty parlor."

At one point, the group saw



Veronica Weber

Ron Herman, chair of Foothill College's photography department, has led two Cuba trips.

women cleaning up a dirty building, and they looked so cheerful that the photographers stopped to talk to them. The women were opening their own business, something dry-sounding involving official forms, but they were ecstatic about it, Bender recalled.

"We were impressed at how friendly and how willing they were to have their pictures taken," she said of everyone she met.

"Very beautiful people, so photogenic," Lockner added.

That willingness shows in many of the Americans' photos. A bare-chested boy transporting a load of sugar cane grins in a picture by Lisa D'Alessandro. In one of Bender's photos, women have allowed the group into their barber shop where business goes on as usual, a boy getting a haircut in front of a Cuban flag and a picture of Beyoncé.

"The strange thing," Herman said, "is that so many people would invite you into their homes."

It seemed to the visitors that the Cubans already knew a lot about America, through TV and through their relatives who had emigrated. But the Cubans thought the Americans didn't know much about them — which was probably true, Bender said. She smiled. "People wanted to convey what their lives were like."

Eduardo Garcia, one of the Cuban photographers who met with the group and has work in the exhibition, echoed that sentiment.

"We photographed together with common goals," he said in a Foothill press release. "Now our American friends can show our reality from their perspective. For us, it's important to gain the friendship of people who care about Cuba."

Herman learned much more deeply about people's lives on the second trip than the first one.

At first he was engulfed by the purely visual: the architecture, the cars, the ocean.

"The second time I was able to see past some of the attraction that your eye sees at first,"



Veronica Weber

Cuban photographer José Manuel Fors at the Foothill exhibit opening.



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Perfecto Romero

"March to Commemorate the Victims of La Coubre, Havana, March 5th, 1960" was taken by Cuban photographer Perfecto Romero. He was Che Guevara's official photographer and now exhibits his work as far afield as the United States, France and Russia.

he said. "I got to understand more of people's stories and their struggles, their trepidation and excitement about change.

"I think my ears were open more because my eyes weren't overwhelmed."

In addition, the second group got to visit some of the people whom Herman had met the first time around. Once they walked up several flights of stairs, trying to find a man and his family whom Herman had photographed in 2010, so he could bring them prints.

"I was determined to find this guy I'd seen on a balcony," Herman said.

"But everyone lives on their balconies, because it's so hot," Bender added, laughing.

Finally the group found the man and his mother and gave them the photos. "They were so touched," Herman said. "They invited us to dinner."

For the Americans, going into people's homes could mean being disturbed and depressed by the poverty they saw. Housing seemed guaranteed for most people, Bender said, but not the quality or size.

Even the most romantic image could have an edge. In Lockner's photo "Stolen Kiss," a young couple shares a moment on a balcony, the girl's hair in a ballerina bun, her hands around his neck. The two stand in a shaft of perfect sunlight, but the walls around them are rust-stained with peeling paint. Power lines droop.

It was a moment that a lot of the photographers spotted, and several cameras went off at once. Herman ended up choosing Lockner's shot for the exhibition, with its lines of hanging laundry at the bottom.

"We all shot it, but no one framed it like that," he praised.

In talking to the Cuban photographers, the Americans also heard stories of poverty and shortages.

'Now our American friends can show our reality from their perspective. For us, it's important to gain the friendship of people who care about Cuba.'

— Eduardo Garcia,
Cuban photographer

"They don't have the resources: chemicals, film paper," Bender said.

One photographer told her that he'd shoot his photos but then didn't have paper. So he'd email them to a friend in Spain to print and mail back. The photographer would sign the prints, then mail them to Spain in hopes that a gallery there would sell them.

In addition, all the picturesque

old cars were there for a reason: It's pretty tough to get new parts for American cars — or new cars — in Cuba, Bender noted. "So they have to remake cars over and over."

But in a land of bright-blue taxis and Cuban children in tidy red-and-white school uniforms, things aren't black and white. The Americans did see poverty, but they also heard Cubans tell them that they had good health care and education, especially in the arts.

"Being a musician, I appreciate music — we heard so much music there," said Lockner, a classical flutist. "We rarely heard street musicians who were bad."

The group went to the ballet and to the Tropicana Club, a well-known cabaret. In one night spot, Lockner listened to the best jazz flutist she'd ever heard. Once on the street a woman came up and spontaneously sang her an aria.

It's a funny thing about shortages. If you're an artist, they can yield surprising creative

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Veronica Weber

Veronica Sosas, left, and Jean Lee look at the "Cuba in Focus" photographs at the exhibition opening in October.

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12



Veronica Weber

Visitors check out the "Cuba in Focus" photos.

Cuba

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rewards.

In his talk at Foothill on Oct. 27, Fors reflected on the material shortages in his artistic career. Although he's shown his work in the United States, Europe and Latin America, he remains based in his home country where he has trouble even buying photo paper.

"I buy it when I travel, because there's not much in Cuba," he said, speaking at a podium through a

translator. Behind him, images of his work were projected on a screen.

Fors takes photography to a different dimension, sometimes creating huge installations with thousands of photos arranged into circles, crosses and other patterns. Crosses, he noted, are a common symbol in Cuban homes, and a circle to him is an "almost perfect shape." He also bundles together old family photos with ropes to make gallery installations.

Since Fors doesn't always have the materials he wants, he uses

what he has. He set one installation on the back of an old carpet piece. He made other pieces from the skeletons of old umbrellas — and then found himself thrilled at the shapes, "like spiders."

"When you have a disadvantage," he said, "you have to take advantage of it." The audience gave a knowing hum.

Fors lived in Spain for a time, with all materials at his disposal, but he grew bored with his work. The best photo paper may be the best, but it's always the same. When you have to use an umbrel-



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Robin Lockner

The impromptu moment in “Stolen Kiss” was captured by many of the American photographers on the Cuba trip, but Palo Alto photographer Robin Lockner had a special touch, framing the lovers in rusty architecture and hanging laundry.

la, or old dishes, or falling leaves, he said, “that makes you change.”

In fact, Fors created a whole series of works inspired by fallen leaves. He made installations of clear plastic boxes partially filled with leaves. He arranged photos on a gallery wall in a scatter pattern, then placed leaves on the floor in a matching array.

At Foothill, Fors also displayed some eerie photos in which leaves seemed to be taking over the world. A chair, a chandelier and a staircase were each half-buried in leaves, creating poignant scenes.

“That’s my house,” he admitted, and the audience burst into laughter. “Instead of a man going out to nature, nature inside,” he said.

The image of Fors coming from a land of shortages to a land of plenty to exhibit his work was interesting, and lingered. Later a woman wondered aloud if Fors had trouble coming to the States carrying boxes of umbrella parts, leaves and thousands of photos.

“How does Homeland Security welcome you?” she asked wryly, to more laughter.



Veronica Weber

Photographer Robin Lockner at the exhibit.

“They treat me well,” Fors responded seriously, then smiled. “But, yes, the luggage tends to be very big.” ■

About the cover: Palo Alto photographer Robin Lockner took the photo “Street Chess.”

What: “Cuba in Focus,” an exhibition by 11 American photographers (Katherine Bazak, Mary Bender, Harlan Crowder, Lisa D’Alessandro, Ron Herman, Bob Hills, Mary Ellen Kaschub, Robin Lockner, Laura Oliphant, Cynthia Sun and John Thacker) and seven Cuban photographers (Guillermo Bello, Raúl Cañibano, Mario Díaz, José Manuel Fors, Eduardo García, Jorge Gaviñondo and Perfecto Romero).

Where: Krause Center for Innovation, Foothill College, 12345 El Monte Road, Los Altos Hills

When: Through Dec. 8. The center is open weekdays from 7:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Cost: Admission is free, and parking is \$2.

Info: More information about the exhibition is available at cubainfocus.wordpress.com. Information about Ron Herman and his next trip to Cuba is posted at hermanphotography.com.

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