

SELECT DISPATCHES FROM CUBA

DISPATCH #4

March 29, 2010

Dear friends,

As I noted yesterday, my "casa" is somewhat different than what most Americans are use to. This morning started out rather interesting in the "casa". I walked into the bathroom to take a shower and noticed a pool of water on the tile floor. I then investigated and found that cold water line under the sink had corroded and sprouted a leak. I went into Magda's living area (the lady who lives here, a rather attractive middle age single mother, who speaks little English) to tell her of my findings.. Magda, still in her night dress, went with me to investigate. We both tried to turn off the frozen corroded valve, with little success. Magda then exited and returned with a hammer an proceeded to whack the valve, sending it across the room and launching a jet stream of water like a fire hydrant that soaked both of us and dramatically increased the "flood" effect. It also launched a stream of spanish that I did not understand, but sort of got the idea. Her son and I tried taking turns plugging the break with our thumbs, but that was of no real effect and we finally let it "fly"...

Oh well, at least the "plumber" arrived in 45 min (try getting a plumber in 45 min in Santa Fe !).

On a more positive note, after drying out and finally eating some nice breakfast that Magda put together, we were able to laugh a little and I then headed out for my meeting with photographer Mabel Llevat. She turned out to be incredibly helpful and was actually an inspiration to listen to her talk about her work (I recorded it). I feel incredibly lucky to be working with her. She is enthused, energtic, a true artist, and speaks great English. She is setting me up with more meetings. Tonight I meet with two additional photographers over dinner at one of their houses. Things are starting to take off !

Already miss all of you, but this is turning out to be a good adventure / project.

PS... All the artist / photographers here are self taught.. starting with someone of the previous generation teaching them. There is no school of photography in Cuba, and only recently a photography professor was added to the University's faculty.

Tony

DISPATCH FROM CUBA #5

March 30, 2010

Dear friends, family, and colleagues,

I'm sitting here mid-morning at Magda's (my host) dining room table looking at the view through the large triple pane windows at the far end of the table. I am the only one in the casa. The scene is an image from Joel Meyerowitz's book, Cape Light. The clouds floating across the sky, the horizon of the ocean, the choppy sea slamming against the seawall sending white spray 30 feet into the air. The occasional pelican and gull moving swiftly across all three panes. It is almost as if I have been transported back in time 20 years to my home on Cape Cod looking at the ocean through the glass wall of my living room.

It was cold last night. Yesterday was rain followed by cold air; considered "unseasonable" by the locals. There were no blankets in my room, so I wore my Marmot windstopper jacket to bed. This morning the bathroom and shower experience was free of yesterday's broken water line adventure. The only downside being the absence of water pressure. Shower by trickle. I use to find more water camping in the desert as a young ranger than I do here in this casa's shower.

Last night I enjoyed the company of Michel Pou and his lovely girlfriend Sandra, joined also for awhile by the wonderful Mabel (pronounced Ma-Bell). Michel and Sandra prepared the traditional Cuban meal.. rice, pork, beans, and greens in generous quantity.

The evening began at nine, these people being night owls. We discussed the research, the photo project. Mabel said that the word was out to all the important photographers that I was here working on this project. I asked her how they knew and she explained how she had sent text messages to everyone. The photographers seem (so far) to be enthused. Speaking of text messages. The Cubans use text messaging from their cell phones due to the very high cost of voice calls. Speaking of cell costs. I made a short call to the US this morning using my Cubacel phone. Maybe 3 minutes. It was approximately \$14 US.

Michel is a youthful 38, Sandra a slim, dark complexion, almost Moorish looking attractive geneticist, with long flowing brown hair. She is 34 years old. She and Michel have been together for five years. Sandra is associated with a scientific institution here and her specialty is how to maximize crop production and archive and preserve important seed strains. She spends a lot of time working with farmers in Chapas, Mexico. Sandra and Michel live in an "improvised garage" that is behind a beautiful older large home in one of the better neighborhoods in La Habana, only a few blocks from the Hotel Nacional. There are large trees on the street and in the yard. It is quiet. A dramatic change from the way most Cuban's live. The large home actually belongs to Sandra's father, but she and Miguel prefer to live in the garage home, so they have their own lives and privacy. Her father's large home is convenient storage of course.

Michel's photography has many dimensions. Like most photographers here, he began in the wet darkroom, so all his work was black and white. His early work was mostly musicians. With the acquisition of an Olympus DSLR, he began color work in earnest. Currently Michel loves to photograph the mountains and wilder regions of western Cuba. I watched him work on his computer. He has Photoshop and also relies heavily on AC-Dsee (sp ?) image management software. He had lots of questions about Adobe Lightroom. He is very savvy about metadata, keywording, etc. Everyone here seems to be on Windows PC's. No Mac's. Understandable considering the difficulty of getting any equipment at all. Michel has internet service – 8 hours per month.

Mabel Llevat's story is intriguing. She is young (maybe 30 ?). She has many bodies of work and has exhibited extensively. She also works at Fototeca helping to curate exhibitions and assisting Nelson Ramirez, the Chief of the State's Photo archives. Her monthly salary is 400 pesos. Regular Pesos, not the higher value Cuban Convertible Pesos (CUC's). 400 pesos is about 20 US dollars. Think about that for a minute. \$14 to make a short phone call to the USA. \$20 / month salary. She tries to supplement her income by selling her artwork. Currently her work is "conceptual" revolving around a story "My Grandfather was a Patriot". It is about her family. Very personal. Her Great Grandfather came to Cuba as a military officer in the Spanish army during the colonial war with Cuba. However, he changed sides and took up arms with the Cuban rebels. He then married a Cuban woman and raised a family. Mabel's grandfather was a writer and wrote many children's stories and books. Mabel did not speak of her father, or if she did, I missed it. After the revolution, her family stayed in Cuba. Mabel inherited her grandfather's home and fixed it up. It is now her residence. She told me that the only way you can own your home in Cuba is if you inherit it. Otherwise it belongs to the State. I looked at some of her images on a computer at Fototeca yesterday. Many self portraits, all tantalizing and mysterious. Images of her grandfather's piano (he also wrote music) and his typewriter on which he wrote his books and stories.

In a couple of hours I will take a taxi to Fototeca and Mabel will introduce me to Rene Pena, who everyone here calls Pupi (Poop-pee). He is said to be the photographer that knows everyone and everyone knows him.

This research project is coming together slowly. Meeting the players is the first step. I'm optimistic, but I'm also realizing how complicated the process is going to be. It will come together of course, but perhaps more slowly than I had anticipated.

Tony

DISPATCH FROM CUBA # 6

31 March 2010

Dear friends, family, and colleagues,

The day started with a fair degree of frustration as I have lost my Hopi silver bracelet that has traveled the globe with me for many years on my right wrist. I am angry with myself for my carelessness. I spent much of the day re-tracing all the possible scenarios in an attempt to locate it. How could I lose it? It had to be in my room. But it was not. No explanation. I suspect someone has it. Hope it serves them well. Have to let go of it and move on.

Spent part of the day with some of Cuba's core photographic talent, watching them display their prints at a "salon" in one of the hotels here. It was orchestrated for the benefit of 8 Americans (who were traveling with some kind of humanitarian group and who all happened to be avid photography enthusiasts). I had not met any of the group beforehand, but found the individuals quite likeable. A couple of sales took place. Most of the photographers at today's salon sell their 11x14 prints for \$300 - \$400. The Cuban photographers have told me that one of their main issues is representation. Some are in galleries, but the galleries are very controlled and you have to have a permit to display your work in a gallery. And of course they have great difficulty exhibiting their work outside of Cuba (although some manage to do so). Selling to US collectors is very complicated, unless the American buys it here and takes it back with them. At the current time, most Americans cannot travel here legally. I am fortunate to be traveling legally with a license.

After the salon, I explored the possibility of another "casa", at least until April 7 when I will move into the Parque Central Hotel for five nights. At this point, the Parque Central seems like a fantasy compared to the typical "casa particular". We Americans are really spoiled. But I keep telling myself that I am building character and gaining a better understanding of the real Cuban culture by staying with these families in their "casas". Not to mention the contribution I am making to the local economy. Speaking of the Cuban economy, I have heard the economy described as a great mystery. And it is. There are two economies...the Cuban economy and the non-Cuban economy.

I found new lodging to move into on April 2nd. It is in the heart of old Havana, with all the noise and commotion of the city. No view of the water, but it appears to be clean and well appointed (as far as casa's go). There is not the serenity of Magda's casa, but it is much more convenient for my work and it will be nice to experience a real shower again.

In some ways, my immersion into the local culture here brings back memories of my earthquake relief work in Costa Rica in 1991. At that time, I was often in the countryside far removed from the comforts of home. Working with local villagers, with primitive equipment and resources, eating locally prepared food, not from cans or boxes, and challenged then with the language as I am now. Instead of the jungles of Costa Rica, I am in the urban jungle of today's La Habana. I would very much like to get to the

countryside here in Cuba, the sooner, the better. The schedule of this project is problematic in that regard.

I have met some of my subjects. Strong subjects that represent the best of the Cuban contemporary fine art photography community. Arranging a schedule to spend time with them, to connect to them as a photographer myself, is more of a challenge than I had anticipated. Photographing them is not going to be easy. They are excited about the project, but reluctant to make the time to work with me. Many are “busy” and it appears difficult for them to “let me in”. I will keep working at it.

All for now...

Tony

DISPATCH FROM CUBA # 7

Saturday, 3 April 2010

Last night I was invited to a gallery “closing” for Rene Pena, a very celebrated and accomplished fine art photographer here. I had already spent a couple of hours with Rene earlier in the week. Rene’s work is rather provocative and on the edge. Some what reminding me of Maplethorpe’s but without the strong sexual elements. The show at the gallery entitled “SAD BLUE CHILD”, was much milder and less edgy than the other work I had seen. The work was a beautiful series of images that stood on their own, but were intended to be conceptual representations of objects perhaps seen through a child’s eyes? I have the catalog and look forward to someone translating it for me so that I have a better understanding of the work. But like all good art, I didn’t need to read about to feel it and experience it.

I have to admit, in all my years as an artist, a photographer, and someone who has attended hundreds of receptions for artists, this was the first “closing” I had ever attended. Apparently, here in Havana, it is customary to have an “opening” and a “closing”. The “closing” was very well attended and festive. Artists and art critics, many of the other photographers that I had met, refreshments, live music, security personnel, and a real party on the patio. At any given time, there was probably 75-80 people at the gallery. The gallery itself, Galleria Villa Manuela, is housed in an old elegant structure, the interior completely re-modeled into a beautiful two story space for displaying contemporary artwork. The grounds included gardens and a large patio where most of the attendees eventually gathered to celebrate Rene and party into the evening.

This morning I awoke in my “new” casa. I savored the hot shower and real water pressure. Not hot for long, but was a treat nevertheless. Although I am located on a street corner in old Havana in what would be considered a “locals” neighborhood

complete with barking dogs, honking vehicles, numerous pedestrians, and considerable commotion (normal), I was surprised how quiet it became late at night. No problem sleeping at all. I like my hosts, Chica and Luis, and their extended family. Their “casa particular” consists of two units. This morning at 9, I shared breakfast at Chica’s table with a young German, Michael, who was fluent in several languages, well traveled, and had hundreds of questions about Obama. He likes Obama. He also had traveled extensively in the US. He lives in Berlin and works for BP in London.

After breakfast, I headed to the bank, just two blocks away to exchange some US dollars for CUC’s (convertible pesos, the preferred currency here). 1 CUC = \$0.80. And of course, just to keep things confused most Cubans also use Cuban pesos. 24 Cuban pesos = 1 CUC. Some travelers from the US consider converting dollars to Euros or to other currencies before coming to Cuba thinking they will get a more favorable exchange rate (obviously the US dollar is penalized about 20% here). I have done it both ways. Presently, with the fees associated with the currency exchanges and depending on where you do it, it is pretty much a hit or miss proposition. I’ve decided not to mess with it this trip. But I do go to a Cuban bank to exchange US dollars as the rate is more favorable than the hotels. The downside is the “waiting” game, which is almost always the norm for anything you want to do in Havana. Long wait to talk about renting a car. Long wait to buy some basic groceries and water, Long wait to exchange money. At the bank, here were about 20 people waiting in a line outside. I took my place in line. I appeared to be the only foreigner in line at this location. After about 35 minutes standing in the sun, I was allowed inside where I took my place in another line, all of us seated in chairs. The “line marshals” kept everyone in line. There are 20 of us seated in the line of chairs. As the next person is directed to a teller window by the “line marshal”, all of us get up and move one chair to our left towards the front of the line of chairs. At least it was cool inside. After about an hour, I had my CUC’s and proceeded to the casa. I received a text from Carlos, my driver and guide who is helping me here. He has been waiting since 9:30 this morning to see if we can get our rental car for an extra day. The plan being to put the work aside for the next couple of days and get into the countryside. As of 11:30, he is still waiting.

I spent some time yesterday morning with Eduardo and Orlando Garcia, twin brothers whose work caught my attention at the hotel “salon” a few days ago. I was invited to meet them at Eduardo’s home. Eduardo lives on Linea, an avenue in “new” Havana. New Havana is more modern and more closely resembles the “comfortable” environment that most Americans would associate with a residential setting. Not the “old” Havana which is literally crumbling before your eyes. But as Eduardo himself told me, “old” Havana is more interesting to the photographer, but “new” Havana is better for him to live in. The two brothers are amazing. They are twins who both possess serious artistic talent, at least to my eyes. Both brothers were trained as painters. Orlando branched off into Graphic Design and Eduardo into photography. This is how they make their living and support their families. I met their wives; both lovely, gracious young women with beautiful light skin and captivating smiles. The work is a collaborative effort of the two brothers. They have ONE camera between them, a 12 MP Canon Rebel DSLR, which they are very proud of. They are both very computer literate and represent the “younger”

generation of Cuban photographer in that neither has ever worked in the darkroom. Eduardo does most of the camera work and Orlando most of the computer work. They shoot only RAW files and produce exquisite Black and White using Photoshop and an early version of Lightroom. Looking at some of their “VIDA” (LIFE) series images, which are highly stylized B&W “portraits”, I was taken by the lighting. Yet they have NO lights. They create the “set” in a small portion of their parent’s house, have their subjects arrive at such a time as to take advantage of “natural” lighting, and modify the light as necessary using a variety of materials to diffuse and shape the light. For example, they use sheets of “architectural” drawing paper, the old kind, which is almost opaque, to “diffuse” their window light. I found the work to be very strong.

I just realize that this Dispatch is getting rather lengthy. I will close for now. Since I will be away from Havana for the next couple of days, it may be awhile before you hear from me.

Hope all is going well. Miss you all.

Tony

DISPATCH FROM CUBA # 8

Sunday, 4 April 2010

Raul Canibano is probably the most respected “street” photographer in the contemporary Cuban photo community. I had met him on my first visit at Fototeca last June. A few days ago I had the opportunity to accompany him as he worked the streets of La Habana. He is fit and he moves fast. I had to really work to keep up with him. He does not shoot carelessly, but is quick to recognize the shot. He is shooting B&W film, using a Nikon film body and usually a 28mm f2.8 lens. This day all of La Habana was celebrating, drinking, shouting, and just generally having a big party along El Prado, the main avenue in Old Havana, near the original Capitol building. There were thousands of revelers in the street, with most of the action between The Capitol and Parque Central Hotel. Oh, I forgot to mention the occasion. Baseball rules in Cuba. And this week was Cuba’s “world series” playoff. And the Habana province team, who were the underdogs, took the championship. All Cubans are serious baseball fans, or so it appears. Raul was in the streets to capture elements of this very important moment in the history of Cuban baseball. It was challenging as the action shifted from moment to moment from one side of the avenue to the next... from the crowds in the street to the crowds in the nearby park... and back to the street. Sometimes it was a little edgy, a little too much emotion combined with perhaps too much beverage. I have to admit there was serious excitement in the air. Raul stays focused and alert. He describes himself as a photographer whose goal is to document many aspects of Cuban life and culture, from the intense to the serene.

Yesterday I decided I needed a break and with my trusted part-time guide and driver, Carlos Chavez, I decided a visit to Vinales was in order. I had not been to this picturesque old tobacco farming village, but had heard much about it. It is a three hour drive into the countryside and the village is situated in a beautiful broad valley from which giant geologic monoliths rise forming an unusual “mountain” range with numerous tobacco farms / plantations along the base of the giant limestone summits. Carlos tells me that tourism is now the major activity in Vinales and it appears to be true. Almost every house along the two main streets are “casas” for rent to tourists. We found good accommodations, although in two separate casas.

Today in Vinales started with a terrific breakfast at the casa and then Carlos drove me to the tobacco farm of Benito Camejo Torres. I do not smoke cigars, but I had heard that Benito was one of a handful of the world’s best cigar makers. He has been hand rolling Cuban cigars in his tobacco barn from his own tobacco fields for over 50 years. He is 70 years old, and has been smoking cigars daily since he was about 12 years old. He is a youthful 70, fit and pleasant. I didn’t know if we could even find him, but with Carlo’s help, we did. I couldn’t have asked for a better afternoon. The conversation (with Carlos functioning as interpreter) was heartfelt and sincere. He talked at length about world politics, his love of children, the tobacco business (the Chinese are moving in big time and that will create some problems he fears), and his family. His wife served espresso (or the Cuban version of it). We spent some time in the tobacco barn (with beam after beam of tobacco leaves hanging to dry) and he rolled a couple of cigars to show me his technique, taking time to make sure I saw the subtle details.

Tonight, I am writing this dispatch in my casa in old Havana. In a few minutes I will walk several blocks to the Parque Central Hotel, log on the net to send this dispatch and reflect on my afternoon in the tobacco barn...so very different from the Parque Central’s marble lobby and fountains.

Tony

DISPATCH FROM LA HABANA #9

Monday, 5 April 2010

I have noticed that the children of Cuba enjoy a special status. They are nurtured and loved, no matter what the status of the neighborhood. It is very visible. I wish I knew more about children... I never had my own. I was a public school teacher once (five years in the classroom) so I have some perspective. I don’t see unwanted and unloved children here. I don’t see parents shutting out their children. Children PLAY and laugh

in the streets. They don't have internet, they are not watching TV (unless it is baseball), and they are not playing video games. They are drawing, reading, engaged in music, attending school and helping farm (in the countryside). And they play of course. Everyone attends school, even in the most rural and remote communities. One of the things that the cigar maker, Benito, so fondly talked about yesterday in Vinales was how he enjoyed telling stories to the children and singing for them, how doing that kept him healthy and happy. He told me that one of the reasons he loves Fidel is that his son as a child had a serious heart condition and that Fidel's doctors saved his son's life. You may recall in one of my earlier dispatches that Mabel Llevat was working on a photographic series about her grandfather and one of the themes in the series was about how he played music and wrote children's stories. Perhaps in this culture and this political setting parents recognize that the future is in the hands of their children. I don't know how they really think of course, and my observations are just generalities based on very limited experience.

On April 1st, there was a large crowd assembled in front of one of the old historic structures along the El Prado. The building was the "Gran Teatro", a theater which originated in the early 1800's. Unfortunately, the grand old theater is in serious structural trouble. Nevertheless, it is the home to the National Ballet and Opera. As it turns out the crowd in front of the building were waiting for the performers to exit from a major ballet performance. The dancers/performers were their children. And it was clear that the boys are just as involved in ballet as the girls here in Havana. Fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunts, grandfather and grandmother... everyone was there to applaud and celebrate the ballet today.

Boys rule the baseball world here, at least in the streets. And they are everywhere. Yesterday, as my guide Carlos and I were driving along a wide avenue through Miramar (the very upscale section of La Habana), a baseball came whizzing through the air crashing into the windshield of my rental car. Instant panic resulting from the knowledge that the Cuban rental car companies will take you to the cleaners if there is ANY damage to the car. We were lucky. In spite of what sounded like a boulder crashing onto the roof, our relatively new Chinese car had really strong glass and the ball skated off leaving only a stubborn stain on the windshield. Whew! In Old Havana where I am staying, this event would never have occurred. The boys living in Old Havana cannot afford a real baseball. They play ball constantly in the streets... with white bottle caps for balls and sticks for bats. On almost every street, there is a "batter up" with his stick while the pitcher winds up for the throw with his bottle cap. I suspect it is good training. Likewise in Old Havana, there is no need for older men to play checkers with anything other than red bottle caps and green bottle caps. I watched two men playing checkers in a doorway today. I found myself drawn to the chair which served as their table. Old wood, well constructed, ornate.... a remnant of a more elegant era that the neighborhood had experienced in the past.

All for now...

Tony