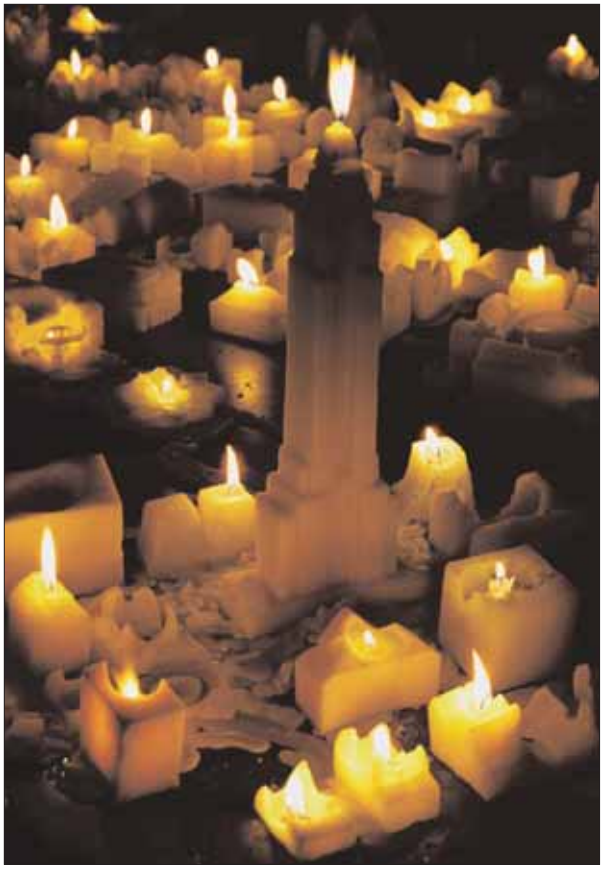
City Lights

Havana artist Carlos Garaicoa illuminates the secret life of cities in his photographs, drawings, and architectural constructs



BY MARC SPIEGLER

As a child, Carlos Garaicoa used to wander the streets of Old Havana with his friends, playing a game of their own devising. "It was a very intense part of the city, a very poor area, dangerous in some places but rich in its architecture and people," he recalls. "We would go walking in the streets, competing to discover places none of us had ever noticed before."

Three decades later, the 37-year-old artist's continuing fascination with Havana—and the microcultures and architecture of cities in general—has led to his being considered one of the art world's premier urbanists. Combining photos, texts, and models, he brings into galleries the haphazard vibrancy of city streets. And at a time when his obsessions have become curatorial leitmotifs, the Cuban artist finds himself inundated with offers to participate in museum shows and international biennials.

Striving to make works that are not only site specific but also city specific, Garaicoa spends an unusually long time in places where he is preparing to have a show. The broad-shouldered, solidly built artist, with his long hair and intense eyes, often explores the environs on foot, searching for inspiration.

When invited by curator Jan Hoet to create a project for Arnhem, the Netherlands, in 2001, Garaicoa was at first stymied by the fact that so much of Arnhem's iden-

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERIA CONTINUA, SAN GIMIGNANO; EDDY A. GARAICOA; ART & PUBLIC COLLECTION, GENEVA/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LOMBARD-FREID FINE ARTS, NEW YORK; ELA BIALKOWSKA/GALLERIA CONTINUA, SAN GIMIGNANO

OPPOSITE ***Now Let's Play to Disappear/Ahora juguemos a desaparecer (II)*, 2002 (top); *De la serie nuevas arquitecturas (From the Series New Architectures)*, 2003 (bottom).** THIS PAGE **Garaicoa in Old Havana (left); *City View from the Table of My House* (detail), 1998 (below).**

tity was wrapped up in its World War II history—under German occupation the city was pummeled by Allied bombs. Finally, he decided to make a model of downtown Arnhem, using wax candles to represent its buildings. His scale version of the city's core was installed in the basement of Eusebiuskerk, the town's main cathedral, which almost burned to the ground in 1944. Illuminated only by the candles, the piece attracted an audience beyond the local one. "Old people from the city came to see it, like mourners," recalls Garaicoa. "They were crying because they found a space and objects that brought back all those harsh memories."

But sometimes there are no epiphanies. "Certain places just don't talk to me," he notes. "In Switzerland I only made a single photo in one year. In Düsseldorf, nothing. In Sweden, nothing. But Luanda, Angola, gives me a new idea every block."

When Garaicoa started working as an artist, Havana's streets were his subject, his studio, his exhibition space. After training to become a thermodynamics engineer (his father's profession), Garaicoa began his mandatory military service. But at 22, given the option to study instead of serve more time in the army, he enrolled in Havana's Instituto Superior de Arte, a school run in a loose, open-studio fashion. There he quickly found himself demoralized by the superior drawing and painting skills of his peers. Despondent, he turned to photography.

Searching for subjects, he once again began scouring the streets, determined to document Havana's reality in photographs devoid of manipulation. "I was interested in

playing with context," he explains, "because an artwork done in the street becomes totally different from a work that appears in an art fair or a museum. And in Havana the street has a more human, more intimate dimension because we don't have the information overload of big billboards and big lights."

Even today, as Garaicoa's work appears increasingly in museums and galleries, Havana's streets remain central to it. In the mid-1990s, he toyed with the idea of reinventing himself as an architect, making drawings, and even signing many works "Carlos Garaicoa, Arquitecto." Some of his projects originated with photographs of half-built or dilapidated Havana buildings, across which he stretched string to re-create the outlines of structures that once occupied the sites. Depending on the viewer's angle, the string "buildings" were noticeable or almost invisible, like ghosts of Havana's past as the playground of the Americas. The pieces revealed both the city's former grandeur and current decrepitude.

The photograph *Cuban Garden* (Paradise), 1998, was part of an on-site installation at Fototeca de Cuba, Havana, that included a wall of graffiti.

In what Garaicoa labels an artistic watershed, he was selected to participate in the 2002 Documenta 11, in Kassel, Germany. The exhibition's curators Octavio Zaya and Okwui Enwezor urged him to move beyond probing Havana's decline. In response Garaicoa decided, besides presenting drawings and photographs, to "develop other skills of my art, including a new series of architectural models and a more serious engagement with architects."

He shifted his focus ahead, to the buildings erected after Fidel Castro's ascent to power. These tended to be purely functional structures built in Eastern Bloc style, often with Soviet assistance. Many crumbled rapidly or were never completed. In his Documenta proposal, Garaicoa proclaimed these structures an "aborted" architecture, "impoverished in its inconclusiveness, proclaimed a ruin before it even existed." He then asserted, "My new project as an 'architect' begins where reality has been detained, where it has been unable to avoid being frozen in time." He brought together trained architects, model makers, and designers to create *Continuity of a Detached Architecture*—a room filled with laboriously detailed maquettes for an array of proposed projects around the city.

In conceiving the new buildings, the team strove to reengineer modes of life, work, and study. "These models are just one dimension of what I want to discuss," says Garaicoa. "When I imagine a new university, I also want to examine the concepts driving the university, not just its physical form." The team designed a tiered-tower university campus, titled *The Babel of Knowledge*, in such a way that the students would learn in a monastery-like setting. Another proposal called for an apartment building with translucent walls to create a highly public, more communal, existence. In a sense, Garaicoa's team was constructing an imaginary Havana, but one based on a pragmatic urban plan rather than a vague artistic vision.

For the 2004 São Paulo Bienal, Garaicoa's installation *Autoflagelación, Supervivencia, Insubordinación* combined twine with maquettes. Each model was connected with a single piece of thread to a twine-line rendering of itself. The strings, he explains, "lighten the piece visually. I like the idea that they float in the air like a spiderweb connecting the models and the drawing."

Garaicoa's preoccupation with the sprawling modern city and the interaction between art and architecture are themes that have gained widespread currency among curators today. All over the world, recent group shows (a number of which have included Garaicoa's work) have probed cities as organisms, charting their grinding declines and sometimes startling transformations. Garaicoa is represented by Lombard-Freid Fine Arts in New York, Galería Elba Benítez in Spain, and Galleria Continua in Italy. According to Leah Freid, co-owner of Lombard-Freid, prices for his work range from $5,000 for a photograph (from an edition of three) to $80,000 for a major installation.

Much in demand as a visiting artist, Garaicoa encourages students to put aside spectacular public projects and instead probe what lies behind everyday urban life—secrets hidden in plain sight. "The history of a place is written in its streets," he says. "You don't have to read books to learn what happened there. So my central question is, How do you discover a city?"

Coincidence plays a huge role. Curator Alma Ruiz of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (LAMOCA)—who organized a Garaicoa retrospective, on view from the 6th of this month through June 12—recalls driving along the Santa Monica Freeway with Garaicoa and pointing out an old storage facility in the process of being demolished. "He immediately wanted to see it up close, but we didn't have the time," she says. "We returned a couple of days later with a borrowed camera. We entered the property, literally trespassing, but no one stopped us, and Carlos was able to shoot an entire roll."

When Garaicoa visited Siena to install his 2004 show at the Palazzo delle Papesse Centro Arte Contemporanea, recalls the center's curator, Lorenzo Fusi, "he stayed a month and a half—not a week, like most artists." Fusi, a native of Siena, says walking through the city with Garaicoa was enlightening. "Carlos has this alertness or hypersensitivity, noticing objects

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LOMBARD-FREID FINE ARTS, NEW YORK

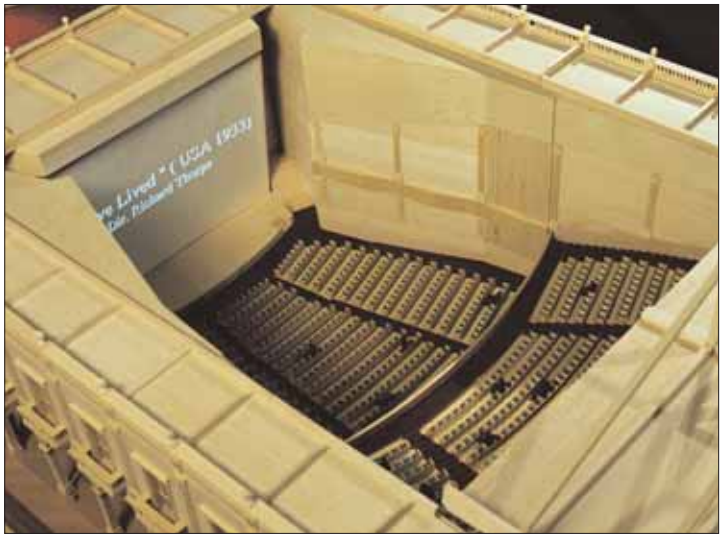
"For my work to progress,' says Garaicoa, 'I need to experience that

and buildings that seem commonplace, and then building up stories around them."

Indeed, Garaicoa says his artworks start out as words, sentences, and stories; the visual aspects come later. "What Carlos reads always informs his works—that's how ideas start to germinate," says Holly Block, director of New York's alternative space Art in General. She first saw the artist's Havana studio in 1994 and brought him to Manhattan two years later to do a residency there. "Stories are intrinsic to Cuba," according to Block. "It's a society controlled by rumor, and storytelling shapes reality in Havana."

Garaicoa's catalogues have featured short fiction by countryman Orlando Hernández and lyrics from the California funk–hip hop band Red Hot Chili Peppers, along with the expected critical essays.

And though Garaicoa is interested in the work of such artists as Francis Alÿs, Hans Haacke, Olafur Eliasson, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, he says he is most influenced by the writings of Borges and Calvino, whose cities are defined less by their permanence than by their unfathomable and ephemeral natures. "Real cities are infinite, places where you can lose yourself and not find your way again," says Garaicoa. "Havana never ends, and such dimensions mean that you can always find microcities inside."



Garaicoa's *Letter to the Censors*, 2003, a detailed reproduction of a Havana theater, includes a tiny screen that plays censored movies.

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Despite Garaicoa's art-world success, there are logistical difficulties involved with living and working in Havana. "Whenever I return, I must bring back materials," he explains. "Traveling into Havana with Cuban artists is always very funny because you never know what they have in their bags. It could be hundreds of toys for an installation, or two boxes filled with pieces of glass, or strange plastics." Even photography gets complicated. Garaicoa imports film from abroad and does his printing in Milan or New York.

But the practical hassles of staying in Cuba are minor compared with the visa issues Garaicoa has faced under the Bush administration. Until 2002 he was able to travel to the States with relative ease. But trouble arose in 2003, after Lombard-Freid was awarded a slot at Art Basel Miami Beach for Garaicoa's *Letter to the Censors*, one of his most ambitious pieces to date. The installation is a detailed scale reproduction of a Havana theater, right down to little red-velvet chairs. "During my childhood my parents would bring me and my brother to the movies and leave us there so they could go to parties," he recalls. "They would take us from one cinema to the other, and we would be so tired. But it was also beautiful because we loved movies." At the fair, the cinema's tiny screen played an exhaustive list of film titles, compiled by Garaicoa's assistants, that had been censored throughout the world. Priced at $80,000, the piece was bought by the Tate Modern and is slated to go on display there this year.

Yet Garaicoa missed his moment of triumph—the Department of Homeland Security never processed his visa request to go to Miami. "My friends kept calling me and e-mailing about the work, and to find out when I would arrive," he says. "It was so sad." Then, in late October, as he prepared the LAMOCA retrospective, the Department of Justice rejected his visa application, so that instead of Garaicoa installing the show, which includes many new pieces, two assistants holding European passports had to oversee the process. Likewise, Freid says, the new political situation complicates the Stateside sale of Garaicoa's work; importing pieces from Cuba now requires navigating customs and legal obstacles.

"My generation of Cuban artists, musicians, and writers opened a big door to the United States during the Clinton years and started to develop real careers there, making connections to galleries, museums, and collectors," says Garaicoa. "Suddenly, we have a new dimension of the embargo problem that we never expected before. If things don't change, Cuban artists will have to forget about America." Garaicoa could, of course, leave Cuba, but replicating his team of assistants, architects, and writers would be difficult elsewhere. He would also miss the blunt critiques from the Cuban art world. "Showing in Documenta was very important for my career, but after that, I did a show in Havana where the artists and critics were severe with my work," he explains. "The public for international shows is diffuse, often more concerned with magazines and catalogues and the art-star system than with the art itself. But your home public doesn't give a damn about all that. They see the work. They know what it is. They need to see development."

So instead of emigrating, he entrenched himself even more deeply in Havana. For a decade his studio was the town house he shares with his wife, Mahé, the first clarinet in the Symphony Orchestra of Cuba, and their baby son, Rodrigo. Two years ago Garaicoa moved his atelier to an old Havana block that is a working-class warren of small apartments. "It's the most fascinating neighborhood in Cuba," he says. "It has a very populist side, a great mix of people on the streets, beautiful architectonics, and a very rough underground feeling. Every day I walk through the city and feel its intensity. For my work to progress, I need to experience that contradiction between the city's beauty and its terrible realities." ■

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