

# Social statements

A Cuban artist's works in diverse media give philosophical insights into societal issues.

BY LENNIE BENNETT | Times Art Critic

TAMPA  
There's no substitute for seeing art directly, but most of the time, you can look at the images we print from a museum exhibition and get a good sense of what it's about.

Carlos Garaicoa's "La enmienda que hay en mí (Making Amends)" at University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum is one of the exceptions. Most of the works just don't translate well in print. And anyway, it's such a fine show, you really should visit.

Here's an example from this marvelous exhibition by the Cuban artist: Large-scale black-and-white photographs show details of downtown Havana sidewalks, old ones made from terrazzo (little chips of marble, a popular surface in the 1950s). As was the custom back then, the name of the business — usually a restaurant or bar — was spelled out in contrasting terrazzo at the entrance.

There are names such as "El Arte" and "La Isla." They're generally neutral. But the artist writes an evocative poem that surrounds these names, imbuing them with broader meaning about life in Cuba, using delicate threads woven around small silver pushpins. The scripts are all different and difficult to read even up close, impossible to capture in a photograph. Shadows cast on the pins create structural lines that suggest a new architectural model overlaying the old material. It's beautiful in and of itself, but wall texts in Spanish and English deepen the context of each work.

Garaicoa is a philosophical multitasker, combining the idioms of art, architecture and language in a seamless fusion that gives us both aesthetic satisfaction and thoughtful insights into social and urban issues. He has plenty of material in Cuba, especially Havana, a city that seems, in his photographs, to have stood still, its lovely old buildings in slow decay with no signs of renewal.

In some ways, Garaicoa seems to argue, that is a blessing. He said during a recent symposium at USF that Cuba's isolation from the rest of world has saved it from rapacious development, while acknowledging that the country anticipates a flood of money coming in from foreign investors as the government seeks to shore up its ailing economy. "It brings with it the good and the bad," he said, and sees a more affluent country as an opportunity to plan carefully in advance what a new Havana would look like, one that would respect its vernacular and limit what he calls "franchise buildings," the ones that are replicated identically everywhere as part of product branding.

He places great store in context. Now that he's a big name in the international art world, he is commissioned to create new works for museums that he makes specific to the place. The USF show doesn't have a local specificity, drawing from previous exhibitions, so we don't know what he would have made of the Tampa Bay area. But all his art has the "Think globally, act locally" sensibility that makes it universal in its nuanced layers of meaning.

Two more series of large black-and-white photographs are also shot in Cuba. In *The Word Transformed*, he uses abandoned billboard frames as his starting point. They were erected in the 1960s throughout the cities and countryside to carry propaganda messages from the Castro government. Today, they are empty, a metaphor Garaicoa could play on without further intervention. Instead, he covers them with grids suggesting new life and repurposing, and in some cases adds new messages that are antipropaganda.

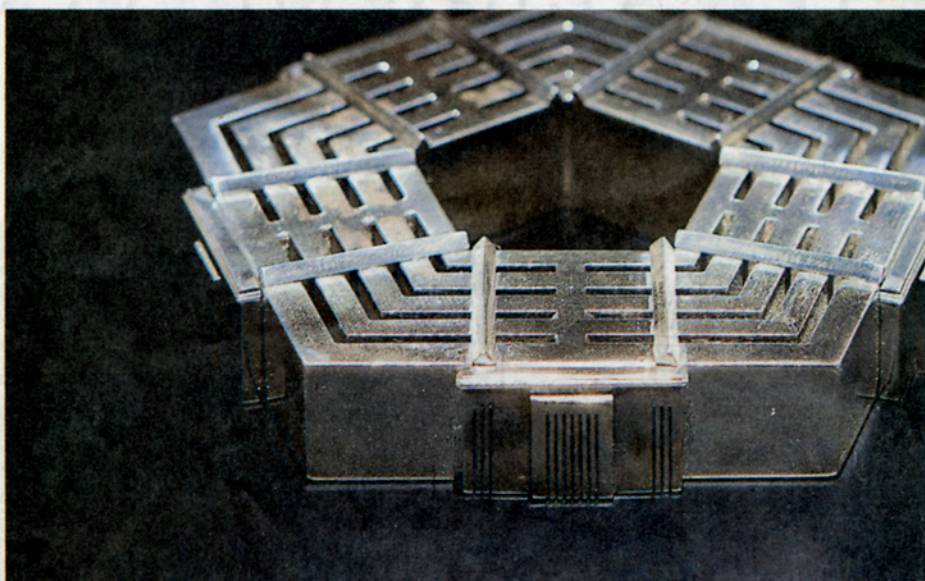
The architectural element in his art has given Garaicoa a platform to express his belief that art should be more than a pretty picture. It has a moral imperative, in his view, to promote change.

To his credit as an artist, he doesn't sledgehammer us with messages. *Bend City (Red)* is a beguiling installation set up on four large, white tables covered with sheets of red paper. Each has a cutout that Garaicoa has bent, coiled and folded into a form that suggests a detail from an architectural model. It's a fun exercise to look at the one-dimensional cutout and figure out how he creates a shape that looks completely different in three dimensions. The work is knee-jerk charming and designed to delight. Taken as a whole, its larger meaning emerges as a microcosm of a city and all the diverse styles that go into the best ones over time.

The most famous and glamorous work in this show is *The Crown Jewels*, eight exquisite little reproductions of buildings cast in silver. They aren't the architectural marvels you would expect. They're replicas of places around the world that have histories of government surveillance, repression, even torture. It's perhaps the least interesting in the exhibition, its message without the subtlety of the others here. It's also undeniably exquisite in its execution, giving a glittering irony to the banality of the buildings themselves.

You could easily miss the most modest work in the show and a renegade. *Saving Time* is a spare clock set high on a gallery wall. Its aspirations are modest, too. Numbers circle the face in correct order but the hands run counterclockwise. It's wishful thinking embodied, Garaicoa's small acknowledgment that we all have a desire to go back in time and perhaps change a future outcome. He and we know the difference between such futility and the possibilities of the future.

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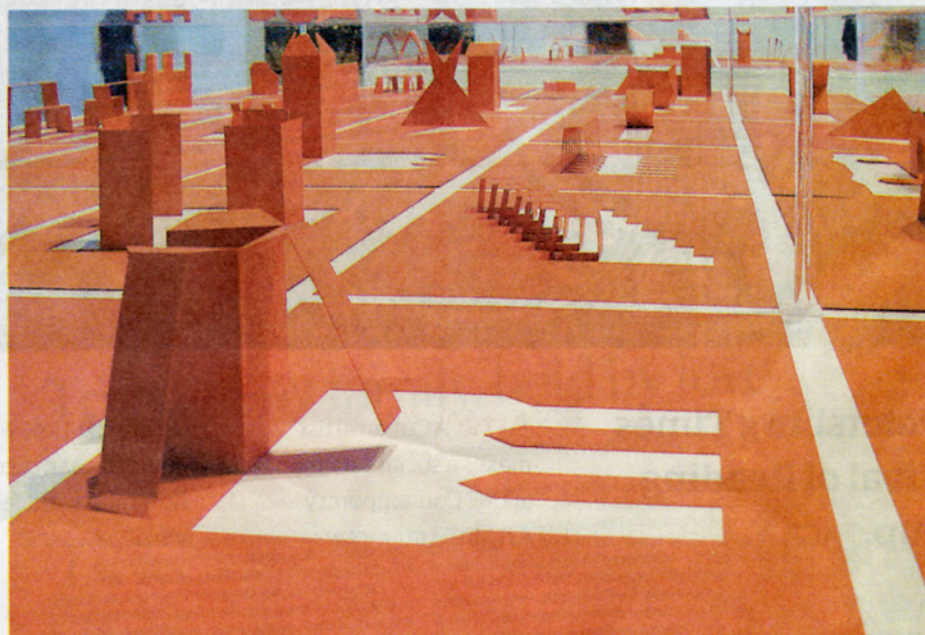


Carlos Garaicoa, Pentagon from *The Crown Jewels*, 2009, cast silver.

Images courtesy of USF Contemporary Art Museum



From the series *The Word Transformed, Part 1*, 2009, light box with Duratrans black-and-white photography.



Detail from *Bend City (Red)*, 2008, cardboard, wood, Plexiglas.

## Carlos Garaicoa: *La enmienda que hay en mí (Making Amends)*

The exhibition is at University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, 4202 E Fowler Ave., Tampa, through Dec. 11. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday. Free. (813) 974-2849 or usfcam.usf.edu.