Abigail McEwen

Revolutionary Horizons: Art and Polemics in 1950s Cuba. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2016. 272 pp. (Cloth US\$ 75.00)

It was not long ago that, during a visit to his studio in Havana, the leading art historian of Cuba, José Veigas, lamented the dearth of serious research concerning the rich history of Cuban visual arts. Veigas noted that Cuba has a multitude of competent art critics and curators, but added that most of them did not display any serious interest in history. I suspect that, during our next encounter, we will inevitably talk about the publication of an informative, well-researched, clearly written, and handsomely printed book: *Revolutionary Horizons*. The book offers a much needed reassessment of Cuban abstraction during the 1950s and precious information about the conflicts that characterized Cuban cultural life during the key years of the Batistato, a period that has been frequently dismissed as just a prelude to the Revolution of 1959. Much of the discussion revolves around the important, but largely forgotten group of Los Once, a cosmopolitan vanguardia generation that coalesced in the Havana art scene between 1953 and 1955 and that was inevitably drawn into the political conflicts of the era.

One of the most important contributions of this book is that it offers a rich, textured reconstruction of the cultural life of Havana during the 1950s. This was a period of intense urban renewal and modernization, a process linked to Batista's ambitious public works plans. The modernization of Havana is frequently described in negative terms, as it contributed to gentrification, was linked to slum removal efforts, and was fueled by the expansion of the gambling, tourism, and entertainment industries with capital injections from the American mob. But as Abigail McEwen illustrates, this was also a period of "cultural renaissance" (p. 15), of architectural innovation, conceptual excellence, and intellectual debate. Young architects, musicians, writers, and visual artists attended the same *tertulias*, belonged to the same cultural societies, interacted with similar state institutions, and shared similar spaces in the print media. Keenly cosmopolitan, they were nonetheless deeply invested in the formulation of new "cubanista mythologies" (p. 12).

Along the way, McEwen brings to life institutions, organizations, sources, and publications that will be unknown even to well-informed readers. An important example is the progressive Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo, founded in 1951 by several young composers, but with the support of writers, filmmakers, and visual artists. The society, which was not state-related, published a journal, opened an art gallery, and represented a sort of incubator for the radical wing of the new vanguardia. The book also discusses the existence

of several specialized art journals that constitute a valuable archive for cultural historians and that were produced by individual art critics (*Inventario*), artists (*Noticias de Arte*), cultural societies (*Nuestro Tiempo*), and state institutions (*Revista del Instituto Nacional de Cultura*). Furthermore, because the volume is beautifully illustrated with a carefully selected set of images that include not just artworks, but also gallery brochures, media articles, journal photos, and exhibitions, readers are able to develop a fuller understanding of the richness of the Havana art scene during this period. Yale University Press should be commended for the exquisite manufacture of the book.

Revolutionary Horizons also makes an implicit intervention in current historiographic debates concerning revolutionary change in Cuba. In the last few years, several scholars have begun to treat the 1959 divide not as a foregone conclusion, but rather as an important problem for serious historical research. McEwen devotes a chapter to the *abstractos* after 1959. Graphically titled “the endgame of abstraction,” she shows how abstraction was placed firmly in the Batista past and characterized by some members of the new cultural bureaucracy as obsolete, even reactionary. Still, some of the *onceños* managed to organize three exhibitions between 1959 and 1963 and, as McEwen acknowledges, “abstract art did not come to an end in Cuba in 1963 or 1965, if it ever did” (p. 213). In fact, it never did. The visions, understandings, and projection of the movement, as it emerged in the 1950s, may have come to an end in the 1960s, but some visual artists continued to work on abstraction after the Revolution, either in Cuba or abroad. Their efforts constitute, in fact, a fruitful area for future research, as we seek to reconstruct the complex and controversial history of Cuban visual arts after 1959, a history that, as this book demonstrates, can never be confined to the artists living in the island. It is telling that the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana organized an exhibit of Cuban abstracto art in 2010 and that one of the prominent abstractos, Pedro de Oraá, was awarded the official Cuban National Prize of Plastic Arts in 2015. Abstracto art, McEwen is right, did not die in the mid-1960s. Thanks to this book, we can now envision new horizons in the study of Cuban art.

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