Painted Voices: Havana's Urban Art and the Shaping of Cuban National Identity

Research Thesis

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Abstract

Cuba has long been a hub for artistic expression, with Cuban art evolving alongside the country's shifting political and social landscapes. This research paper examines street and urban art in Havana's public spaces, exploring how these works reflect and amplify the voices of Cuban society. Conducted through firsthand observation, this study analyzes these artworks in the context of Cuban history and current socio-political conditions, arguing that urban art is a vital outlet for expressing frustrations, ideals, and hopes in a society with limited free expression. This research also addresses a gap in art historical scholarship, as Cuba's rich artistic traditions, especially in street art, are often overlooked. For instance, searching "European Art" on Google Scholar yields 7,750,000 results, while "Latin American Art" returns only 4,460,000. By focusing on Cuba's public art, this paper aims to deepen understanding of the intersection between art, politics, and identity in modern Cuba.

Introduction

Art has always been a voice of revolution, a brushstroke of ideas, thoughts, and frustration forced to be contained and censored by institutional structures[1]. Examples of this revolutionary art can be seen in Countries like Cuba, which unfortunately fell prey to colonization for almost 500 years and then corrupt political leaders such as Fulgencio Batista (1940-1944)[2]. Cuba has seen many revolutions throughout history including the revolution of 1511 when the Taíno Indian Hatuey revolted against Spanish colonizers. Some argue that this

[1] Chomsky, Aviva. *A history of the Cuban Revolution*. John Wiley & Sons, 2015
[2] IBID

revolution is what prompted the thoughts and ideas which eventually birthed the Cuban revolution in 1959, led by former Cuban President, Fidel Castro[3].

Prior to Fidel Castro, a man named Fulgencio Batista was the Cuban president and was very disliked for his authoritarian rule, oppression of human rights, increase of economic disparities, and with that, class divide[4]. Batista was also disliked for his close relations with the United States of America, whom had extensive hold over Cuban industries such as sugar[5]. Like the revolution of 1511, people in 1959 followed Fidel Castro in a revolt because he offered something called National Sovereignty. According to Miriam Webster English dictionary, National Sovereignty is when a nation has "freedom from external control"[6].

During the revolution of 1959, the art of posters became very popular and crucial to the movement. The period between 1959 and 1979 became known as the "Golden Age of the Poster", most often displayed on billboards in Cuba[7]. The posters were a combination of styles which mainly focused on pop art, op art, minimalism, and conceptual art (Craven, 1992). These posters were used to spread revolutionary, socialist, and anti-imperialist messages, fostering a united front among the Cuban people[8]. Unlike traditional artwork housed in galleries, the use of posters made messages widely accessible to the Cuban people as they were displayed in public spaces[9].

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[3] Chomsky, Aviva. *A history of the Cuban Revolution*. John Wiley & Sons, 2015
[4] IBID
[5] IBID
[6] "National Sovereignty," *Merriam-Webster*, accessed October 31, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/national%20sovereignty.
[7] Craven, David. 1992. "The Visual Arts since the Cuban Revolution." *Third Text* 6 (20): 77–102. doi:10.1080/09528829208576370.
[8] IBID
[9] IBID

While poster and art in the revolution played a huge role in uniting the Cuban people, slowly the relationship between politics and art began to change and evolve. As Fidel Castro and the socialist party solidified their power, it was made clear that any art which contradicted the government was not welcome. In many of Fidel Castro's Speeches, he is quoted to say the exact phrase, "Dentro de la revolución todo, contra la revolución nada/Within the revolution everything, against the revolution nothing"[10]. These opposing views became more common especially after a period deemed "The Special Period" when the Soviet Union Collapsed, crumbling Cuba's economy as they were dependent on the Soviet Union's imported goods and economic relations[11]. Since the 1959 revolution any art, especially urban and street art, which goes against socialist ideals are to be covered up, and artists risk the chance of being detained, charged, and possibly sentenced to prison.

In this research paper I will be looking at Urban and Street art in Havanna, Cuba based on my own photographical findings. I plan to analyze them keeping in mind the current economic and sociopolitical systems in Cuba. My thesis is as follows: Street and Urban art in Havana, Cubas serves as a platform for everyday Cubans to express their revolutionary ideals and frustrations, functioning as a living narrative of Cuba's evolving national identity

Literature Review

When conducting research prior to this project these sources specifically caught my attention: Madeleine Hordininski's 2020 "Public and Private Spaces for Art and Dissent in Pos-

[10] Fidel Castro, "Speech at the United Nations General Assembly," September 26, 1960, YouTube video, 50:58, posted by *Cuban Institute of Radio and Television*, November 8, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXdz8Fdcsao.

[11] Paz, Juan Valdés. "Cuba in the "Special Period": from equality to equity." *Changes in Cuban society since the nineties* (2005).

Fidel Cuba", Gary Prevost's 2007 "Fidel Castro and the Cuba Revolution", and the Cuban Constitution as amended since 2002.

To start, when I first embarked on my journey of learning about Cuban art and its evolution, I came across Madeleine Hordinski's 2020 "Public and Private Spaces for Art and Dissent in Post-Fidel Cuba". Hordinski is a photographer and journalist currently based in Cincinnati, Ohio, and previously received her bachelors in Anthropology and Photojournalism at Ohio University[12]. She is a regular contributor to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Her work has appeared in many magazines such as National Geographic, NPR, Teen Vogue, etc. Hordinski's 2020 article is specifically published in *The Macksey Journal,* a journal published by Johns Jopkins University[13]. In this article, Hordinizki analyzes how artists navigate and challenge the boundaries between public and private spaces in a context where political expression is heavily regulated[14]. Specific artists such as Botero and Gabby Roman González and their works are analyzed to illustrate how they use different spaces to convey political messages[15]. This includes performances, installations, and other forms of visual art. Based on qualitative data, Hordinski concludes that public spaces are more controlled and monitored, while private spaces offer more freedom but are less accessible to the general population[16].

While I agree with this conclusion, I also believe from my visit to Havana, Cuba that artists are finding new and innovative ways to display political dissent and frustrations in public

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[12] Hordinski, Madeleine Zoe (2020) "Public and Private Spaces for Art and Dissent in Post-Fidel Cuba," The Macksey Journal: Vol. 1 , Article 118, pp. 1-25.
[13] Madeleine Hordinski, "LinkedIn profile," accessed October 31, 2024, https://www.linkedin.com/in/madeleine-hordinski-2a91a3153/.
[14] Hordinski, Madeleine Zoe (2020) "Public and Private Spaces for Art and Dissent in Post-Fidel Cuba," The Macksey Journal: Vol. 1 , Article 118, pp. 1-25.

[15] IBID
[16] Hordinski, Madeleine Zoe (2020) "Public and Private Spaces for Art and Dissent in Post-Fidel Cuba," The Macksey Journal: Vol. 1 , Article 118, pp. 1-25.

spaces. Additionally, while reading this article, even though the author does speak of graffiti art and art in institutions such as Fabrica de Arte, none of the art was included. The lack of formal analysis or in-depth research on street pieces which could be seen one day and covered the next prompted me to draft my research paper. Through this research paper I wanted to document urban art in Cuba so that the voices of the Cuban people will not be forgotten.

Moving on, another piece I came across when conducting research for this project was Gary Prevost's 2007 "Fidel Castro and the Cuba Revolution". Gary Prevost is an Economist and Professor of Political Science at the College of Saint Benedict & Saint John's University in St. Joseph, Minnesota. Dr. Prevost earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from University of Minnesota and is and Author and Editor of more than twenty books and academic articles focusing on Latin America and South Africa. In his article, Dr. Prevost highlights Fidel Castro's rise to power during the Cuban Revolution as a response to Batista's corrupt regime, with Castro's guerrilla tactics and grassroots support leading to his success[17]. Prevost emphasizes Castro's post-revolution reforms and the deterioration of U.S.-Cuban relations, which pushed Cuba toward the Soviet Union and cemented its socialist identity during the Cold War[18]. Towards the end of his paper, Prevost states some claims, which I found myself questioning especially after traveling to Havana, Cuba this past August[19].

Towards the end of his paper, Prevost explains his interest on how Cuba maintained its socialist principles in wake of an economic crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Prevost describes that Castro was adamant of not returning to capitalist ideology, and instead insisted

[17] Prevost, Gary. "Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution." *Headwaters* 24, no. 1 (2007): 19-33
[18] IBID
[19] Prevost, Gary. "Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution." *Headwaters* 24, no. 1 (2007): 19-33

that the sacrifice must be shared among the Cuban people[20]. When traveling to Cuba, I visually saw a huge class divide between the people who work for the government and the rest of the population. While most people living in Havanna, Cuba are homed in crumbling, old, and structurally unsafe home (sometimes without a roof), citizens who work for the government, foreign embassies, or people considered extremely wealthy prior to the revolution, are housed in gorgeous freshly painted and gardened mansions.

The wage gap and privileges are starkly large, which led me to another resource, hoping to better understand why this wage gap is occurring. “Race and Inequality in New Cuba: Reasons, Dynamics, and Manifestations” by Katrin Hansing explains the importance and difference between the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) (American dollar) and Pesos Cubano. The Hansing explains the Cuban Peso has “become virtually worthless” in Cuban society because stores and state-run businesses have become almost exclusively CUC-based, and has been since the 1990s. Currently, one dollar (CUC) is worth 23,97 Cuban Pesos[21]. Keeping this information in mind, consumer goods for the Cuban people are extremely high given that they are imported goods, which includes 80% of Cuba’s food supply[22]. Cuban people are unable to afford these goods given that the “average monthly state-worker salary is 687 pesos Cubanos (roughly $25-28 dollars depending on the exchange rate), which is not enough to feed a family[23]. Additionally, legal-access to CUC currency is limited to government led ventures such as the

[20] Prevost, Gary. "Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution." *Headwaters* 24, no. 1 (2007): 19-33
[21] Hansing, Katrin. "Race and inequality in the New Cuba: Reasons, dynamics, and manifestations." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2017): 331-349.
[22] IBID
[23] IBID

tourism industry and foreign-joint ventures, making it extremely hard for the average Cuban to access CUC[24].

Additionally, later in Prevost's conclusion he brings up the question on how Fidel Castro survived in power for so long and wrote this, "As the previous narrative has shown, Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution has survived because they have tapped into the deep wellsprings of Cuban nationalism and desire for independence and because they have constructed in Cuba a society that improved the living conditions for a majority of Cubans through model programs in health care, education, housing, and food security"[25]. In the beginning of the revolution, Fidel came to power and found support in Cuban nationalism and increased equality and autonomy, but as history has gone on it can be suggested that increased power and governmental control and censorship is what kept Fidel in control and power of the Cuban government. This censorship can be seen in many artistic movements such as the performative art of Tania Bruguera and Luis Manuel.

Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara is a self-taught Cuban artist and political activist, who defended human rights and commented on social Cuban conditions with his art[26]. Luis Manuel is the co-founder of the San Isidro Collective, a group of artists, journalist, and musician who formed to combat increasing violations of human rights in Cuba and censorship[27]. The group is named after the San Isidro neighborhood that they originally formed in a poorer neighborhood of Havanna, Cuba popular for its expressive graffiti art[28]. Luis Manuel has been detained and

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[24] Hansing, Katrin. "Race and inequality in the New Cuba: Reasons, dynamics, and manifestations." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2017): 331-349.
[25] Prevost, Gary. "Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution." *Headwaters* 24, no. 1 (2007): 19-33
[26] "Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara," U.S. House of Representatives Human Rights Commission, accessed October 31, 2024, https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/DFP/Countries/Cuba/Luis-Manuel-Otero-Alcantara.
[27] IBID
[28] IBID

imprisoned for 5 years since July 11, 2021. The San Isidro movement is just one of many examples in how the Cuban government exercises its power to sensor the voices of the Cuban people[29]. Luis Manuel was sentenced for 5 years for "Contempt" and "Public Disorder", terms often used to criminalize citizens who oppose/criticize the government[30].

Reading events such as these spurred my interest in Cuban art and the emerging voices of the Cuban people. This resource encouraged me to delve deeper into more modern art in Cuba which comments of their everyday lives, frustrations, and relationship to their identity as a Cuban citizen. I specifically wanted to travel to the San Isidro neighborhood to see if the art had stopped or ceased to exist since the arrest of the San Isidro Collective members.

Urban Art in the Streets of Cuba

Streets of Havana, Cuba

From my trip to Havana, Cuba I observed that the streets of Cuba are in fact still filled with the vibrancy of Cuban street art. I spent majority of my time specifically in the San Isidro Neighborhood. San Isidro is a neighborhood located in Old Havana, Cuba. It consists of many streets with wash lines connecting them. It has become an art district especially since the San Isidro Collective formed. In this paper I define street art as art, whether it be graffiti art or art of another medium, presented in outside public spaces on streets, trains, buildings, and other publicly viewed surfaces.

One street art piece that caught my eye was *Gorilla with a Cigar* (Figure 1)[31]. The artwork piece *Gorilla with a Cigar* depicts the head and right shoulder of a black gorilla with a

[29]"Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara," U.S. House of Representatives Human Rights Commission, accessed October 31, 2024, https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/DFP/Countries/Cuba/Luis-Manuel-Otero-Alcantara.
[30] IBID

cigar in its mouth. The gorilla is spray-painted on a cream-colored wall in the San Isidro neighborhood, right next to a tree that seems to sprout from the wall itself, growing alongside the drab shade of brick that scales the surface. The gorilla's head emerges from the right side of a rusted barred window. He faces diagonally while peering straight at the viewer. His eyes are dark, round orbs with speckles of white that mimic the catch of light. His eyebrows form a heart shape, framing his flared, flat nose and puckered lips, which grip the cigar. The most detailed part of the painting is focused on his face and mouth. As the artist expanded to other extremities such as his chest and shoulders, the art piece itself and strokes of paint faded into the black and beige wall. The top right portion of the gorilla's head and right shoulder is outlined in black, which then extends into squiggly black droplets that rise upward. Finally, on the right faded shoulder of a gorilla is a wound which has been stitched together. The style of this wound seems to be different from the rest of piece, so it may have been placed there by a different artist.

 [32]

[32] Unknown, "Gorilla with a Cigar," 2024. Graffiti, Havana, Cuba. Photographed by Kaitlyn Harris-Piccirilli

(Figure 1)

The *Gorilla with a Cigar* can be suggested to be imitating Fidel Castro as it mimics the iconic picture of Fidel Castro often seen with a Cigar. The artist of this street art may have chosen to represent Fidel as a gorilla because of the symbolism regarding monkeys in art. To preface, I would like to acknowledge that the monkey has been used to represent people of color in art throughout history. While I do not believe race is the motivator as to why this artist would depict Castro as a gorilla, it is important to note that doing such is unacceptable and horrible. With that, an important fact to note is that monkeys as a species are the most similar primate to humans. Monkeys, specifically great apes such as the gorillas and chimpanzee, share many similarities with humans such as opposable thumbs, nails instead of claws, the use of tools, the capability of bipedality, etc.[33]. However, while great apes are similar to us, they still give into their more primal instincts since their brain size is roughly three times smaller than humans[34].

The representation of Fidel as a gorilla could be suggested as a comment by the artist on how Fidel gave in to his more primal instincts and was swayed and changed by human greed and power. In Luis Plazas' *Revolutionary Manifestos and Fidel Castro's Road to Power,* Plaza provides many key quotes from Castro's Meeting of Cam Colum 1, where the national directorate of the 26th of July Movement unanimously agreed the following, "To exhort all reporters, radio announcers, graphic arts workers, and all newspaper, radio, and television enterprises to rapidly organize to strongly answer the new censorship, so that they become, as in Venezuela, the leaders of the people in the final struggle for liberation"[35]. This quote came from

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[33] O'Neil, Dennis. "Overview." Behavioral Sciences Department, Palomar College. 2014. Retrieved from http://anthro.palomar.edu/primate/prim_8.htm

[34] Tomasello, Michael, and Esther Herrmann. "Ape and Human Cognition What's the Difference?."*Current Directions in Psychological Science*19.1 (2010): 3-8

[35] Plazas, Luis. "Revolutionary Manifestos and Fidel Castro's Road to Power." (2014).

the *Total War Against Tyranny Manifesto,* issued on March 12, 1958. This Manifesto was a joint statement from Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement and the *Directorio Revolucionario.* Many quotes can be analyzed from this manifest, but the quote written above I find quite contradictory to the future decisions of Fidel Castro. In this quote Castro and the revolution utilizes the media to combat censorship by the government. This statement is ironic since after Fidel Castro came into power, censorship in Cuba has not changed. The presidents of Cuba since the reign of Castro, as well as the rest of governmental system, have censored any opposing socialist/governmental views of the Cuban people.

An example of this censorship can be seen in the San Isidro Movement, a movement comprised of many different artists (i.e., visual, musical, journal) who aim to challenge the government regarding their lack of artistic and political freedom. The members of these movements have been harassed and targeted ever since 2018 when the group formed[36]. Perhaps one of its more well-known members Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara has been imprisoned since July 11th, 2021[37]. He was arrested right after he had posted a video online saying he would take part in one of the San Isidro Movements biggest protests[38]. Luis was arrested and imprisoned to five years in a maximum-security prison for "contempt" and "public disorder"[39]. The evidence that the court considered incriminating enough for this sentence was a series of texts and images Luis had posted protesting political ideas/people. The court deemed it as "insulting national symbols"[40]. Article 35 of the Cuban Constitution states, "Citizens have the freedom of speech

[36] Lantos, Tom. "Cuba," U.S. House of Representatives Human Rights Commission, accessed October 31, 2024, https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/DFP/Countries/Cuba.
[37] IBID
[38] IBID
[39] IBID
[40] IBID

and the press keeping with the objectives of socialist society[41]. The phrase “keeping with the objectives of socialist society” is what allows a court decision such as the one with Luis Manuel to come to pass.

Another piece I encountered just a few streets over, on the other side of a police station, was *Coraje* painted by @mr_myl(Figure 2)[42]. The graffiti piece titled *Coraje* occupies the side wall of a building that rises approximately two to three stories. It presents the image of a child with a bandana wrapped around his mouth, set against a vibrant red background. Above the child's head, a black strip prominently displays the word *Coraje* in bold, uppercase white letters, which translates to “courage” in Spanish. The child is depicted in black and white, characterized by short, dark hair with wispy bangs that fall across his forehead. His eyes are directed outward, gazing at the passersby below. The monochromatic color scheme imbues the child's eyes with a haunting quality, rendering them almost vacant and somber in expression.

[41] "Cuba Constitution," accessed October 31, 2024, https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/Cuba%20Constitution.pdf.
[42] Cassas, Luis, “Coraje” Creator Unknown, 2024. Graffiti on Concrete, Havana, Cuba. Photographed by Kaitlyn Harris-Piccirilli

(Figure 2)

Coraje seems to have been painted in 2020. At first, when examining this piece, keeping in mind the "2020" it can be interpreted that this piece may be about COVID-19, and the masks people wore during the pandemic that year. However, after delving into the image, its history, and technological footprint I have found that the piece is in fact commenting on Cuban citizens inability to express their thoughts and opinions freely. The graffiti piece can be traced to an Instagram account titled @goonvibesteam[43]. On their feed is a video of the piece *Coraje*, and in their caption the account leaves an encouraging and complimentary message to the creator of the art piece @mr_myl. Mr. Myl, aka Luis Cassas, is a multi-talented visual artist who graduated from the University of Arts in Havana, Cuba. On his Instagram the only pinned photo he has is of his piece *Coraje*. In his caption below the image this is written (As translated from Spanish to English):

[43] @goonvibesteam, Instagram profile, accessed October 31, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/goonvibesteam/.

> "In Cuba, any kind of expression against the revolution is treated as a crime and heavily punished by law. It is understood that the Revolution is represented by the state and that is this who decides what kind of action or thinking is against or in favor.
>
> The deep social and economic crisis affecting the Cuban citizens keeps him thinking about how to feed his family first and then everything else…
>
> As a Cuban I am extremely interested in sincerity. The right to be honest in what you do to me is the definition of FREEDOM"[44].

The 'he' MYL mentions in his caption likely refers to the boy in *Coraje*. In the painting, the artist conveys the boy's plaguing thoughts about 'how to feed his family' through the deep, dark shadows under his eyes. Additionally, the boy's pale pallor suggests the low energy and fatigue of malnutrition, as well as the heavy responsibility of worrying about his family's well-being. MYL uses a bandana to cover the boy's mouth, symbolizing his lack of freedom to express his opinions. I also find it interesting how MYL portrays the boy as so young. His youth may highlight the loss of innocence among Cuban children and the serious issues they must face at such a young age.

Urban Art in Small Businesses and Community Projects

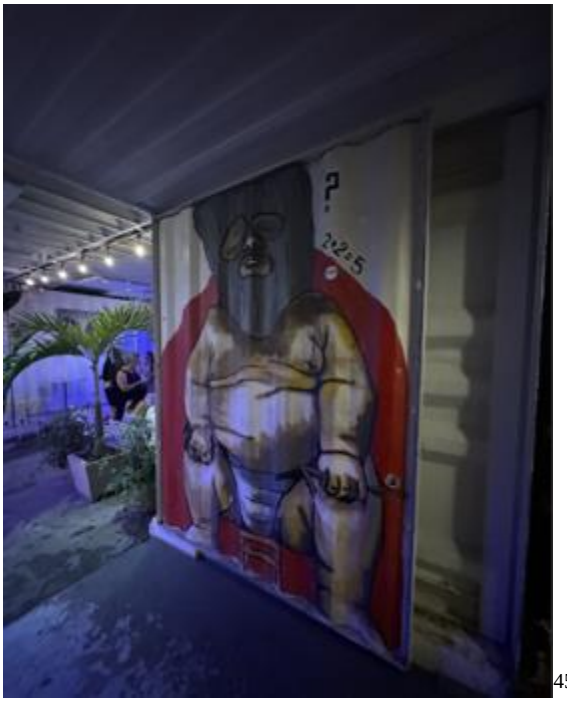
Fabrica de Arte

In this section of my paper, I will be speaking about public art in small businesses and community projects. Urban art is a style of public artwork which are created by and representative of urban city dwellers. During my travels to Cuba, walking along the streets and into popular establishments I observed one symbol which seemed to appear repeatedly, and it was the equation "2+2 = 5". Below is a photograph of an art piece displayed at a "community

[44] @mr._myl, Instagram profile, accessed October 31, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/mr._myl/.

project" called Fabrica de Arte located in Havanna, Cuba (TIME MAGAZINE). On this piece the equation *2+2=5* can be seen (Figure 3).

The artwork piece *2 + 2 = 5* is placed in Fábrica de Arte, an old factory, which had burned down and then renovated as a public art space for the community. The piece *2+2 =5* is placed on a sheet of metal, which acts as a sliding door or wall to separate the space into sections. The time of when this picture was taken, the door and/or wall was slid back to create an open space concept. The metal has wavy ridges, which run vertically. Displayed on the metal is a painting of a large child sitting on a small stool. The child seems to be dressed in a diaper, and its pudgy skin hints to the figure's youthfulness. The child's face is covered by a gray ski mask, which only leaves room for the child's eyes, nose, and mouth to be seen. As our eyes move down, we see the right hand of the child seems to be grasping a crowbar or shorts. Behind the figure is a large, bright, and bold red semi-circle extending from the figure's feet to the middle of its head. Along the top-right of the semi-circle's perimeter the equation "2+2=5" is written with a "?" hovering above.



[45]

(Figure 3)

The equation "2+2 = 5" may be remarkably familiar to many as it is most famously used in the American classic novel *Nineteen Eighty-four* by George Orwell, written in 1895. This dystopian fiction novel is about a society under control of a totalitarian party, and the main character ponders that if the government tells them that "2+2=5" they would believe it even though it is not true because the government told them to[46].

In Cuba, the first artist to coin this equation on the streets of Havana, Cuba and make it his tag was Fabian Lopez. The book *Street Art and Democracy in Latin America* by Olivier Dabène written in 2020, contains some quotes with Fabian Lopez and Debène in an interview together. In response to the equation and his street art which often displays people with masks

[45] (Maybe Lopez, Fabian), "2 + 2 = 5", Creator Unknown, 2024. Paint on Metal, Havana, Cuba. Photographed by Kaitlyn Harris-Piccirilli.

[46] George Orwell, *1984*, Chapter 2 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949).

covering their faces, Lopez said he "felt overwhelmed by social issues Cubans had to deal with every time he walked down the street" as paraphrased by Debène within her written work[47]. Additionally, Lopez revealed that the reason that he obscured the figures faces was because he was not referring to any one person.

Many other artists other than Fabian Lopez now use this equation to tag on walls as a way to express their confusion on how and why their society now lives the way that they do and why nothing adds up. The goal of Fidel Castro creating a socialist state and overthrowing Batista was to erase class divide, improve human rights, and strive for national sovereignty. None of these promises have happened in the 65 years which have passed. The equation "2+2=5" serves as a powerful symbol for themes such as control, manipulation, and distortion of the truth for the Cuban people.

Moving on, the piece *La Gran Ola (After Hokusai)* also exhibited at the Fábrica de Arte, presents a collage of photographs that, when viewed collectively from a distance, form a large image of ocean waves(Figure 4 & 5)[48]. This composition features two prominent waves, swelling and rising to their fullest potential, as they travel to the right, seemingly in pursuit of one another. The waves are rendered in a deep navy blue, evoking the profound depths of the ocean, and are accentuated by the white foam of rushing water. This imagery is set against a beige and ivory background. The waves themselves consist of numerous smaller photographs depicting one of two distinct actions: 1) an individual constructing or navigating a raft, and 2) a mugshot of a person being processed into jail.

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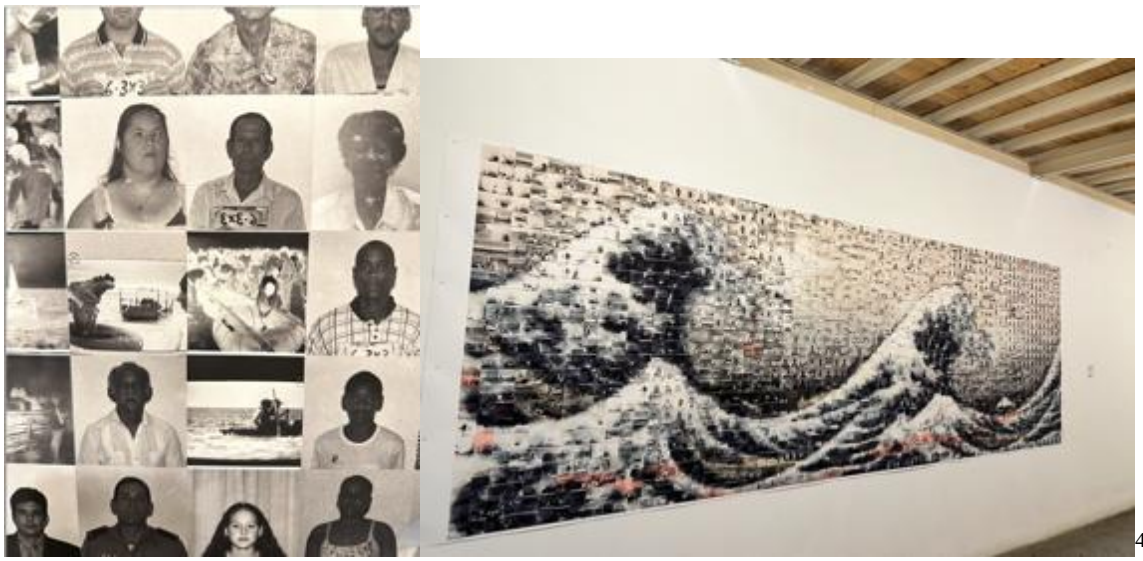
[47] Dabène, Olivier. *Street art and democracy in Latin America*. Cham, Switzerland: palgrave macmillan, 2020.

 [49]

(Figure 4 & 5)

This collage mimics a vary famous Japanese woodblock print called “The Great Wave” by Hokusai made around 1830. In *The Great Wave* Hokusai depicts swells of bright blue waves as they tower over Mount Fuji, Japan’s tallest mountain with a height of 3,776 meters. Among the waves, three wooden rowboats thrash around[50]. During the time, Japan was in the process of isolation from the outside world. During Japan’s Edo Period from 1615 to 1868, The Tokugawa Shogun, or feudal overlords, took over Japan and decided to Isolate it for fear that Christianity and other foreign influence were a threat to the stability of Japan[51]. These feudal overlords believed that the sea and great waves were a form of protection and physical divide from the outside world[52]. From then on, foreigners were sent back to their country and citizens were not

[49] Lludmila, Nelson, “La Gran Ola (After Hokusai),” 1999-2023. Digital Pigment Print, Fabrica de Arte, Havana, Cuba. Photographed by Kaitlyn Harris-Piccirilli.

[50] James Payne, *Great Art Explained*, YouTube channel, accessed October 31, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/@GreatArtExplained
[51] James Payne, *Great Art Explained*, YouTube channel, accessed October 31, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/@GreatArtExplained
[52] IBID

allowed to leave Japan. However, *The Great Wave* suggests that the waves, which were once their protection, may ultimately be their downfall (Payne, 2021). As the world progresses and advances, Japan stands at a standstill alone and may be swallowed up by the wave themselves forgotten[53].

This print *The Great Wave* story draws many similarities to that of Cuba. Similar to Japan, Cuba became mostly isolated when it cut off its ties to various trading partners to join the Soviet Union. Still today after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba is more isolated than other countries and behind in technological advances. *La Gran Ola* is like *The Great Way* because they both have Prussian blue creating waves. Unlike *The Great Wave, La Gran Ola* has no Mount Fuji. The absence of Mount Fuji was most likely done to express how this collage is about Cuba and not Japan. Similarly, *La Gran Ola* has three empty boats, which may represent the many people who try to illegally leave Cuba on a raft/boat but are instead captured and arrested. This interpretation is further supported by the mini photos of people making or setting off on rafts/boats comparatively to their mugshots, suggesting many failed attempts at leaving the country. Through the collaged photographs and great wave depictions, *La Gran Ola* captures the isolation and resilience of Cuban people, while brilliantly drawing parallels with the famous Japanese piece *The Great Wave*.

Clandestine

Clandestine is a queer-owned and woman-led company located in Havana, Cuba. Clandestine is Cuba's first independent fashion brand which has many graphic design items

[53] James Payne, *Great Art Explained*, YouTube channel, accessed October 31, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/@GreatArtExplained

ranging from tote bags to clothing to posters[54]. Clandestine is a small-owned business in Cuba, and therefore not owned by the government. While Clandestine is still censored through their website and internet, they have more flexibility to express their opinions and don't worry as much about being covered up such as the street art on the public streets of Havana, Cuba. However, much of the artwork does take some interpretation and uses humor to convey its point.

 [55]

(Figure 6)

For example, in clandestine, there is a beautiful poster hanging for purchase called, *Supermercado* or in English "Supermarket" (Figure 6). This poster depicts cartoon drawings of yellow shelves with a pink background filled with white mason jars. In the poster there are five and a half rows of mason jars depicted. Some mason jars also have a square yellow label on the front of the jar, whereas others remain white or "clear." In the bottom left-hand corner, the term *Supermercado* is printed in grey, bold letters.

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[54] "Clandestina Champions LGBTQ+ Community in Cuba: A Lesson on Resilience and Driving Social Change," Clandestina, accessed October 31, 2024, https://clandestina.co/blogs/news/clandestina-champions-lgbtq-community-in-cuba-a-lesson-on-resilience-and-driving-social-change.

[55] Clandestine, "Supermercado," Printed Poster. 2024. Photographed by Kaitlyn Harris-Piccirilli, Havana, Cuba.

This poster demonstrates the import and food/medicine scarcity crisis occurring in Cuba currently. Every day, Cubans struggle to obtain goods due to the lack and shortages of imported goods. Ever since the collapse of The Soviet Union, which accounted for 70-80% of Cuban trade and imported food, Cuba has had to learn how to survive and make up for that lost 75%[56]. Since the collapse, farmers have done an amazing job learning how to create organized fertilizers and pesticides since the government could not afford to import any.

However, the growth of agricultural land was not enough to support the Cuban people. Even with the imported food from top trade partners such as Argentina, Brazil, Spain, Mexico, and the Netherlands, the Cuban people are still finding it hard to eat more than "one meal per-day"[57]. In a study which analyses the factors which contribute to food security and food satisfaction in everyday life, a citizen is interviewed and asked how they preserve cultural food traditions: ""We cannot, there is no way of preserving traditional food habits if there is no food. Maybe in the beginning of the month but then there is no food. There is only surviving." (Mahlis, Nakabayashi, Goto, Cooper, 65)"[58]. Together, these challenges emphasize how horribly the scarcity crisis has impacted not only Cuba's economy but also the daily lives and cultural traditions of its people, leaving them in a constant struggle for survival.

Moving on, another piece which caught my eye in Clandestine is the piece titled *Utopia* (Figure 7). Created by Clandestine, *Utopia* is a printed poster that depicts a large fence set against an idyllic tropical landscape. The fence, rendered in a deep black, looms over the viewer due to the low vantage point from which it is portrayed. Behind the fence, a blue sky and a bright

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[56] Nakabayashi, Lauren, Keiko Goto, Sara Cooper, and Kristen Mahlis. "Factors Associated With Food Security and Satisfaction With Food-Related Life Among Cuban Adults." *West Coast University Journal of Health and Wellness* 1, no. 1, pp. 1-5 (2024).
[57] IBID
[58] Nakabayashi, Lauren, Keiko Goto, Sara Cooper, and Kristen Mahlis. "Factors Associated With Food Security and Satisfaction With Food-Related Life Among Cuban Adults." *West Coast University Journal of Health and Wellness* 1, no. 1 (2024).

yellow sun are visible in the upper right section of the poster. In front of the sun, the silhouette of a palm tree rises above the fence, enhancing the composition. The sun's rays cast a yellow tint over the sky, contributing to an almost dreamlike quality. In the foreground of the poster, the word “UTOPIA” is prominently displayed in yellow against the dark backdrop of the fence.

The idyllic landscape behind the large fence seems to symbolize Cuba, highlighting its iconic tropical scenery with a setting sun peeking through palm trees. The fence acts as a boundary between Cuba and the outside world. By positioning the viewer’s perspective so that the fence appears to loom overhead, the artist evokes a sense of foreboding. This effect, combined with the fence’s dark, blackout coloring, gives it an ominous, almost threatening quality.

[59]

(Figure 7)

[59] Clandestine, “Utopia,” Printed Poster, 2024. Photographed by Kaitlyn Harris-Piccirilli, Havana, Cuba.

The term “utopia”, defined by Merriam-Webster, “a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions”[60], is displayed ironically on a poster of this fence enclosing a paradise-like landscape. The fence suggests that this utopia may not be as perfect as it seems or is perfect only for certain individuals or organizations, such as the Cuban government. While it is not certain that this work specifically critiques Cuba, the context of its display in a small business in Havana suggests it might be a commentary on the country’s realities.

Conclusion

In essence, urban and street art in Havana, Cuba serves as a powerful lens which shows how Cuba’s complex socio-political landscape is depicted and defied. Graffiti art present in the streets of Havana, Cuba such as “Gorilla with a Cigar” and “Coraje” boldly communicate the Cuban people's frustrations with Cuban life since the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as their thoughts and opinions of current and past political leaders. Despite the prompt cover-up of these pieces with white paint, displaying artwork on the public streets of Havana communicates the reclaiming of public spaces as a platform for individual expression and thought. Meanwhile, community projects and small businesses such as Fabrica de Arte and Clandestine demonstrate the creative ways of creating an inviting space for community and freedom of thought while still navigating the turbulent waterers of censored society.

Each of the artworks discussed shares a crucial characteristic: they are strategically positioned to reach a wide audience, particularly foreigners. The *Fábrica de Art*, for example, though a community-driven initiative, is primarily marketed towards tourists. Similarly, *Clandestine,* a Cuban-founded store, maintains a location in Miami, Florida, fostering

[60] "Utopia," *Merriam-Webster*, accessed October 31, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/utopia.

connections with the South Florida community. Meanwhile, Havana's street art is so accessible and widespread that it appears on nearly every block, impossible to ignore. Both public and private spaces in Havana, Cuba have discovered ways to sing their truths despite the muffled noise of government agendas. While these songs are soft and quiet they are present and require an audience which is willing to quiet down and listen closely.

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