

Greenfield Prize-winner Coco Fusco speaks her mind in new solo exhibit at The Ringling

By Marty Fugate | October 12, 2018

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Fusco's 'Twilight' features work commissioned by the Greenfield Prize and other pieces that speak to her feelings about Cuba

The Ringling's latest exhibit explores the work of Coco Fusco. This Cuban-American artist has a broken-hearted love affair with the island nation, and all its contradictions, possibilities and broken promises. Fusco's unrequited love is a family legacy.

Fusco was born in 1960 in New York City. Her mother had fled the Cuban revolution a year before. As a child, Fusco grew up imagining the lost world her mother had left behind. "For me, Cuba was physically absent but present in every other way," she says.

“The island became very real to me through language, jokes, music, food, family, habits and heated political arguments at the dinner table.”

As a child, Fusco’s homeland was a kingdom in her mind’s eye. Her identity was constantly in flux – a “self” that she constantly invented and reinvented. Like it or not, she learned to think like an artist. And that’s exactly what she became when she grew up.

Today, Fusco is an internationally recognized creator who colors outside the lines of art forms, genres, mediums and ideologies. Her multimedia art blurs the boundaries of gender, race, and national identity. Fusco questions the dividing line between artist and audience as well. Her multi-media productions incorporate large-scale projections, closed-circuit TV, and streaming live video. It’s interactive, and that’s an understatement. Fusco’s art draws you in whether you like it or not. You can love it or hate it, but you can’t remain neutral.

The Hermitage Artist Retreat didn’t. It awarded Fusco the 2016 Greenfield Prize, which includes a residency at the beachfront artist retreat on Manasota Key and a \$30,000 commission for the creation of original art. The artist would go on to create two bold, new works with her commission. The Greenfield Prize rotates annually among composers, playwrights and visual artists, and winners are given two years to complete their work, which is usually presented on the weekend of the announcement of the new prize winner in the spring. Fusco was given extra time to finish her projects. Previous visual arts recipients include Sanford Biggers and Trenton Doyle Hancock.

You can see Fusco’s edgy creations in The Ringling’s latest solo exhibition, curated by Chris Jones. Her satiric sculpture will gleam on the museum’s grounds. Four of Fusco’s recent videos will also be shown continuously in the Monda Gallery for Contemporary Art. She created these pieces during the “twilight” of the Cuban Revolutionary state – a volatile transition from Fidel Castro’s legacy to an uncertain future. Fusco’s videos explore the role of Cuba’s intellectuals and artists – with a special focus on the poets who dared raised their voices in dissent.

“The Message in a Bottle from Maria Elena” (“La botella al mar de María Elena,” 2015), gives voice to María Elena Cruz Varela. The video’s narrator is a contemporary Cuban poet who struggled for political reform during the early 1990s. The breakup of the USSR and the loss of Soviet subsidies had led to a time of economic hardship for the Cuban people, but also a sense of new possibility. Cuba’s artists and intellectuals hoped for their own version of Glasnost. Many (including Varela) signed a list of reforms and sent it to the Communist Party Congress. They naively hoped their “message in a bottle” would lead to change. They got jail, censorship and exile instead. Varela honors their courage – and still hopes to get the message across.

“The Confession” (“La confesión,” 2015) is a plea for the legacy of Heberto Padilla. The celebrated Cuban poet was imprisoned in 1971, after he’d openly criticized the state. The Cuban government released him 37 days later, after forcing him to sign a trumped-up “confession” for “counterrevolutionary crimes.” Padilla would later go into exile. The world has largely forgotten him, but Fusco stubbornly remembers. She narrates her documentary from Havana’s Hotel Riviera, once a magnet for Cuba’s disillusioned, post-revolutionary intellectuals, now a crumbling, mid-century relic. From the faded glory of her solitary room, Fusco looks back in anger at those lost years when the Cuban revolution turned against its revolutionary thinkers.

“The Empty Plaza” (“La plaza vacía,” 2012) is a brooding meditation on the vacuity of Cuba’s public life. It revolves around video footage of Havana’s Plaza de la Revolución. This plaza is ground zero for the ginned-up enthusiasm of Cuba’s state-sponsored rallies and assemblies. It’s a famous gathering space, but nobody’s gathered there. Fusco wanders the revolutionary void, interspersing scenes of the empty present with a past full of people and possibility. Yoani Sánchez adds a mordant voiceover narration to the montage. She’s a famous Cuban blogger, who cleverly evades censorship by sending her posts through a network of global friends. Kill private thought, and you kill public life. That seems to be the message.

Fusco’s two most recent pieces flowed out of her Greenfield Prize commission. The first is a video, the second a work of sculpture.

“To Live in June with Your Tongue Hanging Out” (“Vivir en junio con la lengua afuera,” 2018) is a cry from the heart for Reinaldo Arenas. This contemporary Cuban poet is openly gay and openly criticized Castro. The government answered his criticism with prison and total censorship. Arenas fled in 1980; his poetry remains a crime. In the video, contemporary poet Amaury Pacheco and actors Lynn Cruz and Iris Ruiz reflect on the poet’s life and recite his words – which remain unspeakable in Cuba to this day.

“Tin Man of the Twenty-First Century” (2018) is an ambitious work of sculpture. Fusco created it in collaboration with Chico MacMurtrie, a cyberpunk sculptor famed for his wickedly satiric robotic installations. The form of the piece recalls the Tin Man from “The Wizard of Oz.” It’s familiar ... but somehow off. A little chunkier than the original Tin Man. And that look on his face...

With a little study, you finally recognize it. Depending on your political affiliation, you’ll either be outraged or find it outrageously funny.

President Donald Trump is the satiric target. Obviously, he wasn’t available to model for the artwork. How did Fusco and MacMurtrie create such a cunning likeness?

They conducted “photo research on Trump and the details of his face, body and limbs,” explains Fusco. “Chico knew exactly how to build a body that would be sturdy enough for exhibiting outdoors. He is just brilliant with metals! The head was a separate endeavor. We printed it in 3D in resin, and then dipped it in nickel.”

This barbed political commentary may stir up controversy, though that should come as no surprise. If you invite a dissident artist, expect dissident art. Still, did anyone have any second thoughts? I asked Jones if The Ringling had ever tried to talk her out of it. His answer is “no.”

“To me, the work feels like a three-dimensional political cartoon,” says Jones. “It would be hypocritical to provide space for an artist to draw attention to the persecution of artists in one country, and then deny her the right to make a political statement about our own.”