

Art

10 Cuban Artists Who Are Shaping Contemporary Art

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Coco Fusco, *The Empty Plaza / La Plaza Vacía*, 2012. Museum of Arts and Design

In 2021, an influential group of Cuban artists called for a boycott of the 14th Havana Biennale. The Cuban authorities had jailed many of their colleagues for exercising their right to free speech, and these artists wanted to fight back. Protests against the unjust and repressive government have persisted. At this year's Documenta 15, Cuban artist Tania Bruguera and the Cuban collective Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt (Instar) highlighted the plight of Cuban artists in a moving series of presentations. On Friday, June 24th, numerous artists and human rights organizations condemned the Cuban regime when it sentenced performance artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara to five years in prison for “contempt, defamation, and public disorder.”

It would be inaccurate to say that all Cuban contemporary art is an act of protest—many of the artists in this list steer away from the subject. Yet it would also be careless to ignore that, for decades, Cuban artists have made art under impossible circumstances. The country faces dire social and economic conditions, and artists and intellectuals are subject to constant harassment and arbitrary detainment at the hands of a government that wants them to remain silent. Though these tribulations have led many Cuban artists to exile, many have also stayed and held their ground.

The following is not an exhaustive list of praiseworthy Cuban artists, but rather a primer on the diversity, beauty, resilience, and depth of Cuban contemporary art.

Cuban American interdisciplinary artist Coco Fusco is a renowned feminist theorist and writer who surveys themes of race, gender, politics, and war. She has worked across multimedia productions, video, photography, and interactive performance.

Many of Fusco's works focus on the plight of Cuban nationals. Her video piece *The Empty Plaza/ La Plaza Vacía* (2012), created after the Arab Spring in 2011, reflects on communal spaces either used for protest or left empty. The Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, Cuba, falls into the latter category. Fusco has also spoken out against the Cuban government's injustices toward artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara.

Fusco is renowned for *The Year of the White Bear and Two Amerindians Visit the West* (1992–94), a two-year performance piece she created with Mexican artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña, in which the duo stood in a cage and played the part of Latin American islanders for a white audience. This year she participated in the Whitney Biennial, "Quiet As It's Kept," with her video work *Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word* (2021). The piece meditates on the wreckage of the coronavirus pandemic. It includes footage of Fusco on a boat in Hart Island, New York—the location of New York City's public cemetery, which was managed by the city's Department of Corrections until 2021. Fusco alludes to the millions of New Yorkers buried in mass graves by prison laborers since 1869.