

Cuba *is* very much an idea, much more than a reality; it is an idea that no Cuban takes for granted, but nurtures, cultivates, defends, possesses, celebrates. This exhibition both documents and brings to life Cubans' experiences of being part of Cuba. . . . Thus the idea of Cuba emerges slowly, deliberately, bit by bit. The images in this book and exhibition are seductive and powerful, and the voice that conveys its stories both vulnerable and compelling, much like Cuba itself."—Lillian Guerra

Alex Harris and Walker Evans

In May of 1998 I traveled to Cuba for the first time. What made me think I could arrive at a complicated historical moment and, in a matter of days or weeks, produce intimate portraits of Cuban society? The answer lies—at least in part—in three photographs I had seen years earlier: of a young woman behind a barred window wearing a pearl necklace; of a stevedore with both a toothpick and a cigar in his mouth, wearing a straw hat; of a ragged *campesino* family eating plain bread as they wander through a wealthy neighborhood. These photographs are from a series of pictures made by Walker Evans in Havana in May of 1933.

Walker Evans was my photography professor in the fall of 1970, my senior year at Yale. Out of curiosity about his work, before the class began I looked at a library copy of his 1933 book with Carleton Beals, *The Crime of Cuba*. Evans made photography look easy. He seemed to do little more than point his camera directly at life and click the shutter. I was encouraged to try my own hand and eye at making pictures. By the time I discovered that photography wasn't as easy as Evans's pictures implied, it was too late. I was living in an adobe house in a New Mexican village and already calling myself a photographer.

Years later, on the eve of my first trip to Havana, I looked again at Evans' Cuba photographs. The portraits were far more complicated and mysterious than I remembered. For instance the *campesino* family wandering in a wealthy Havana neighborhood no longer appeared so down-and-out. They looked resilient, doubtless one of many rural Cuban families who had migrated to Havana searching for work. They stare past Evans back at us, skeptical of our momentary interference in their lives. In a quiet family portrait Evans manages to hint at the masses of Cubans who resent the intrusion of the United States and put their hopes in José Martí, and to predict the millions more that will one day turn to Fidel as the savior of the Cuban people. If Evans could accomplish this as an outsider on his first brief trip to Havana, perhaps I could be optimistic about the photographic possibilities of my Cuban journey as well.-Alex Harris.

"I know much more now about Cuba than I did when I made these photographs. But I do not believe that I could now make better pictures. This exhibition is an act of faith in myself as a photographer to discover something in my pictures I didn't already know or feel, something I wasn't already looking for." -Alex Harris

Alex Harris

The Idea of Cuba

This remarkable journey into contemporary Cuba by photographer and writer Alex Harris is at once a powerful and mysterious evocation of life on the island and at the same time an original meditation on the nature of documentary photography. On each trip to Cuba, Harris chose a different camera, a new theme, and a distinct approach to peer deeper into the fabric of Cuban society and to show us the sides of Cuba that outsiders rarely see.

Like his mentor, Walker Evans, who photographed Cuba in 1933 at a pivotal political moment, Harris arrived at a crossroads in Cuban history. Well known for his extensive photographic work in the Hispanic Southwest, Alaska, and the American South, Harris made three trips to Cuba to photograph a nation still coming to grips with the economic and social devastation that followed the collapse of the socialist bloc in 1989, a nation beginning to imagine a future without Fidel Castro.

In the foreground of these photographs are some of the archetypes of contemporary Cuban life: the indomitable American car, the beautiful young woman, and the revered revolutionary hero. Yet Harris recasts these symbols. We look at the car, but through it to consider the tangled relationship between Cuba and the United States. His portraits of young women challenge us to consider the nature of our gaze and to see the changing status of Cuban women in relation to Fidel's political survival. The Cuban hero, José Martí, a repeated icon in these photographs, evokes a constant physical and spiritual presence for the Cuban people.

Alex Harris is a founder of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and of *DoubleTake* magazine, which he edited for the first twelve issues. He is the author or editor of fourteen books, including *River of Traps* with writer William deBuys, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in general non-fiction. He has curated a number of major exhibitions including *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart* (with Margaret Sartor), which opened at ICP in New York and toured the country for a decade. Harris has exhibited widely and his photographs are in numerous museum collections including The Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The J. Paul Getty Museum, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, and The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. His awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship in photography, a Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowship, and a Lyndhurst Award. Harris has taught at Duke for over three decades and is currently a professor of the Practice of Public Policy and Documentary Studies at Duke. Alex Harris is represented by Ann Stewart Fine Art.

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"Paradox defines Cuba, just as it continues to define Cuban identity and perhaps all identities. The experience of confronting paradox through the thoughts and images of Alex Harris's journey through Cuba elicits feelings of belonging, wholeness, and hope. By the end, we know that we have not simply glimpsed the inner core of a society while standing on the outside looking in, but have embraced Cuba on its own terms." -Lillian Guerra, assistant professor of Caribbean history, Yale University.

José Martí's words, copied by Alex Harris from Martí memorials in Cuba, are reproduced above Harris' photographs throughout this exhibition.

José Martí

To begin to understand what José Martí (1853-95) means for Cubans, imagine a national hero who is a blend of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr., add the authority of Moses, and mix in a few dashes of Walt Whitman.

Among Cubans, Martí is not a controversial hero. He is revered both by Cubans living in exile as well as by Cubans who have never left the island. Statues of Martí are everywhere in Cuba: in homes, yards, schools, parks, factories, prisons, farms, and on many street corners. Martí's legacy continues to be evoked and promoted by Fidel and Raul Castro's government, just as it has been by all of Cuba's governments since 1902, even as they strayed from Martí's revolutionary objectives.

While working on my first photographic series in Cuba in 1998, I began to pay attention to statues of José Martí. Back in the United States, I researched Martí's life. I learned José Martí died in an early skirmish of the second war for independence against Spain and is considered the hero of that struggle. Martí was a poet, teacher, journalist, political activist, translator, diplomat, orator, and champion of racial equality. Martí spent much of his life in exile from Cuba, and much of that time in the United States where he wrote his ideas for the future Cuban nation.

In 2002 I returned to Cuba to photograph memorials to José Martí. My problem was how to begin to encompass in a photograph something as cerebral and complex as Martí's idea of Cuba. Near the end of his life, in the early days of photography, Martí anticipated my dilemma in a question jotted in one of his notebooks: "Who could photograph thought, as a horse is photographed in full gallop or a bird in flight?"

As I made my first photographs of his memorials, I saw Martí's words at the base of many statues. These aphorisms had been extracted by Cubans themselves as the essence of Martí's idea of Cuba, then chiseled into stone or stamped onto copper plaques. I began to copy every Martí adage I saw. Of all Martí's writings, these brief sayings became a kind of compass I used to find my way around the island. If I couldn't photograph Martí's thoughts, at least I'd have his most important ideas in mind when I decided to snap the shutter. This seemed a way for me to look at contemporary Cuba through the lens of history, to see the present in relation to Martí's imagined future. - Alex Harris