

Cuba's Culture of Self-Censoring Artists

By Danielle Galván Gomez

Havana, CUBA— Towering images of revolutionary leaders have monopolized Cuban skylines for years. They dominate streets and squares in every city and town.

After the country's longtime leader, Fidel Castro, died last year, the government ordered walls and billboards plastered with the slogan "I am Fidel" or "We are Fidel." This was the latest in a long line of government campaigns that use public spaces to convey political messages.

Some Cuban artists who feel unhappy with political or social conditions, however, dare to post their own messages on walls. Some are strikingly provocative.

One of the most popular graffiti artists now working in Cuba spray-paints images of a forlorn-looking boy in a grey ski mask and signs them with the tag, "2+2=5." His message is clear: something about Cuba doesn't add up.

Dozens of this artist's works have appeared on walls around Havana. Sometimes exclamation marks or thought bubbles add to the mystery.

In one mural, the boy is depicted standing in front of a Cuban flag, directly pointing at the viewer, while a large question mark dangles over his head. In another, he sleeps on a giant egg, dreaming of it being cracked open.

The artist guards his anonymity. In a brief interview, however, he said that the boy he paints "is all of us."

"Life is hard for people all over the world, but the problems of Cuba are distinct," he said.

The artist was reluctant to discuss details of the authorities' reaction to his work, but said police have harassed, detained, and interrogated him. His work is often painted over soon after it appears. In order to remain a visual presence in Havana, he must constantly produce new images.

In a country where almost nothing other than official messages is seen in public spaces, this artist's work seems inherently defiant. The essence of his message, he

said, differs slightly from the well-worn government slogan “Free Cuba!” He prefers, “Long live Cuba, but free!”

The Cuban government has constructed and packaged a visual and ideological brand that it promotes to Cubans and tourists. Rooted in the idea of the revolution’s success and the greatness of its leaders, it is reflected in everything from cigar cases with Che Guevara’s portrait to t-shirts bearing officially approved slogans.

Artists who openly and explicitly violate or contradict the government risk being charged with “showing contempt” or being “counter-revolutionary.”

For decades, Cuban culture was limited by a famous rule that Fidel Castro pronounced in 1961.

“What are the rights of writers and artists?” he asked. “Within the revolution, everything. Against the revolution, nothing.”

Some artists in Cuba today are testing the limits of that policy. Hours after the official announcement of Fidel Castro’s death, for example, the painter and street artist Danilo Maldonado Machado was arrested. He had painted a wall in Havana with the words, “He’s gone.”

Machado was held for two months without charges. He had already spent nearly ten months in prison in 2015 for painting two live pigs with the names “Fidel” and “Raúl,” planning to release them in a Havana park as performance art. He was never charged. Authorities did approve his application for an exit visa, though, and since January he has lived in the United States.

Machado told the Los Angeles Times that his work in Cuba was an effort to “invade the visual space of others.”

“The only thing that is recognized as art are the things that are within government institutions,” he said. “If you are outside of that, it’s not art. It’s not anything.”

Three hours east of Havana, in the tourist-friendly town of Trinidad, tourists may choose from an array of revolutionary kitsch. In one art gallery, though, paintings and sculptures by the artist Danilo Moreno offer a more ambiguous view of Cuba.

Several of his works are small, metal Cuban flags flying from a pole made of barbed wire. Each flag is hand painted with the words “Viva Cuba.”

An assistant at the gallery said she did not consider this work political, but rather a symbol of how Cubans “find hope in the flag.” The artist, however, described it differently.

“You can be hurt by barbed wire,” he said in an interview. “Barbed wire is used in fencing to enclose cattle. Cuba is a pen. We Cubans are like livestock enclosed.”

Moreno said he feels grateful that he can display and sell his work. Nonetheless he must be careful.

“My work has been censored,” he said. “If you cannot convince them, you must confuse them.”

Cuba is colorful and vibrant, as hordes of American tourists are now discovering. Visually it is an artist’s paradise. Classic cars with sparkling pink and green paint jobs cruise the streets. Building facades are bright cerulean blue and dusty orange. Markets bustle, as leathery hands inspect pig carcasses alongside buckets of bright yellow sunflowers.

Near one of these markets, spray-painted on a wall in small red letters, were the words “Artista Autocensurado,” or self-censored artist. The same message has popped up in other parts of the city. No one knows who the artist is.

The government still wants Cubans to echo the slogan, “Free Cuba!” Some artists, though, want them to turn that slogan into a question: “Is Cuba Free?”