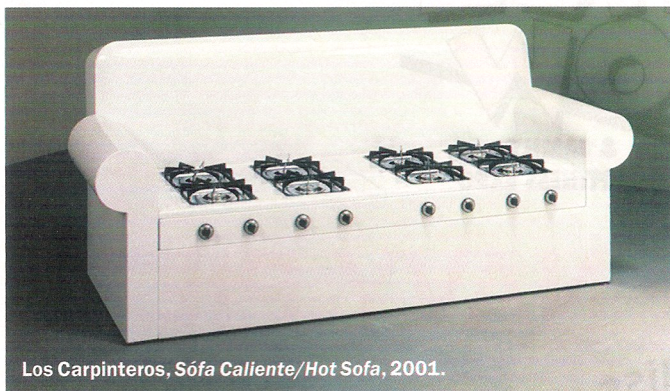


Collective consciousness

Los Carpinteros meld humor and skill **By Ruth Lopez**



Los Carpinteros, *Sófa Caliente/Hot Sofa*, 2001.

Every object made by the Cuban art collective Los Carpinteros calls out to be touched. It isn't hard to suppress the urge, however: During both visits we were shadowed by eagle-eyed security guards who would make a dictator (or jail warden) proud.

"Inventing the World/*Inventar el Mundo*" at the Chicago Cultural Center pulls together mostly works on paper and sculpture created by Alexandre Arrechea, Dagoberto Rodríguez and Marco Castillo. The trio met as art students in Havana and started working together in the early 1990s. Dubbed Los Carpinteros ("the carpenters"), the impoverished artists scavenged for materials. They cut down trees in a forest for wood and raided abandoned mansions in a neighborhood described as once being the Beverly Hills of Cuba. Chunks of harvested architectural ornamentation were recycled into artwork, and Los Carpinteros even re-created some of the forms before moving on to the architecturally based conceptual projects that launched their international art careers.

The two earliest pieces here—*Havana Country Club* (1994) and *Marquilla cigarerra cubana/Cuban Cigar Label* (1993)—are the only paintings displayed and are incongruous with the rest of the work.

Yet, they show us where these guys were headed. Los Carpinteros would abandon painting but not the attitude. The humor in the social narratives depicted on these canvases remains in their work. And the skill evident in the heavily crafted wood frames, which seem to leap off the wall, are crucial components of the paintings.

Pop Art meets Dada in *Estuche/Jewelry Box* (1999), a human-size bureau in the shape of a hand grenade—all 48 drawers in this absurd piece function. In *Mano Creadora/Creative Hand* (2000), a large wooden wall piece in the shape of a hand, compartments that pull out are articulated by the natural lines and folds of the skin. This penchant for not-so-hidden compartments continues in numerous cabinet projects. *Gavetón/Big Drawer* (2001), a metal filing cabinet outfitted with a wooden bottom drawer that stretches out about five feet, would make a good monument to bureaucracy.

More puzzling, but no less intriguing, is the miniature pool with eight swimming lanes on a stand about the size of a table hockey game. A motor hums away

underneath, keeping the water in the pool frozen. On the walls nearby are several studies of swimming pools, including a large watercolor of an amoeba-shaped one ringed by metal stairs.

In 2001, Los Carpinteros created a series of sculptures of coated steel (the same material used in kitchen appliances) that had been outfitted with stove-top burners. Included here is a sofa with gas burners and a staircase with electric burners, both designed to function as stoves if properly hooked up. This stuff isn't just witty, it's well made.

Equally impressive is the draftsmanship. *Caja/Box* (2001) is a watercolor of a pile of brown cardboard boxes with open flaps revealing their corrugated edges. The long watercolor study of piles of concrete blocks, *Proyecto de acumulación de materiales/Project of Accumulation of Materials* (1999), shows the beauty of these essential, yet easy to ignore, items.

Los Carpinteros have been widely shown abroad, but other than the 2000 Havana Biennial, they haven't exhibited in their home country since 1998. Mobility hasn't put a dent in their production. In fact, if anything, they seem to be thriving. Their Biennial project, *Ciudad Transportable/Transportable City*, a collection of ten big fabric structures of iconic buildings, was first shown at the Havana Biennial and then traveled to New York's P.S. 1 in 2001. In the past few years their work has been

hungrily collected by such major institutions as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

But if you want a little more context, consider the large watercolor near the exit titled *Embajada Rusa/Russian Embassy* (2002). It's one of the studies for a series of wooden sculptures based upon notable buildings in Havana that the artists have made into a cedar chest of drawers. When the Russian economy collapsed in the late '90s, it dragged Cuba down with it (U.S. embargoes are another story). The hundreds of diplomats stationed in the embassy left, leaving behind this nearly empty high-rise. As for the sculpture, it was purchased by the Guggenheim Museum the following year.

Review

"Inventing the World/*Inventar el Mundo*" is at the Chicago Cultural Center through April 2. See **Museums & Institutions.**