

## Painting Liberty in Cuba

The 'Miami Five' produce a series of artworks to highlight injustice

By [Louis Boyd](#)

Tuesday 1 May 2012

Picture an unrelenting cell, 7ft by 13ft, in a high security facility in Victorville, California. The cell is occupied by Gerardo Hernández. These four walls contain the story of 13 years of injustice and the struggle for vindication.

2000 miles away, in Florida, his friend and erstwhile colleague, Antonio Guerrero occupies a similar cell. They are linked by their plight, and the manner in which they have chosen to cope with their incarceration, the manner in which they are making this injustice known. In a new exhibition opening at The Norman Rea Gallery on the 1st May, the liberating power of the visual arts is to be explored in relation to this one, very current, political event.

In 1998, Hernández and Guerrero, Cuban intelligence officers attempting to disrupt terrorist attacks targeting their country, were arrested in Miami along with three other colleagues. Their subsequent trial and imprisonment was controversial, and has been condemned as unjust by authorities from across the world, including Amnesty International, eight Nobel Prize winners, and 110 Members of Parliament from the UK, who wrote an open letter to the U.S. Attorney General in support of the group, known as the 'Miami Five'.

“Visual art provides an international language, enabling people to articulate suffering and oppression.”

'Beyond the Frame', the provocatively-named exhibition showcasing Hernández and Guerrero's work, that opened in London prior to its touring to York, Glasgow and Manchester this month, aims to draw attention to the case of the Miami Five, as well as to the wider culture of the visual arts in Cuba. "We called the exhibition 'Beyond the Frame' because it ruptured the traditional role of the frame as a boundary and acknowledged the Five have been 'framed' by the US government", says Dodie Weppler, the expert on Cuban art overseeing the project.

The history of political campaigning through art is long and (it would seem almost necessarily) fraught with contention. We think of Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds or Picasso's Guernica, and can easily see the creative influence of controversial political agendas on provocative or boundary-breaking art. Often, it would seem, visual art provides an international language, enabling people to articulate suffering and oppression. When successful, this can be done in a genuinely affecting way.

So how does the art featured in Beyond the Frame approach this tradition? How does it provoke and convey the story of the Miami Five?

Pieces produced by a collection of renowned, international artists are being exhibited alongside the work of Hernández and Guerrero. It is an eclectic collection, including a print piece by Susan Hiller entitled

Small Homage to Marcel Duchamp, a photographic work by René de Jesús Peña González, Wardrobe, and a mixed media collage by Juan Roberto Diago Durruthy called Dia. The titles of the works betray little in the way of an underlying thematic connection, and (frankly) the styles of their execution do even less to clarify the situation.

However, within this collection of works there is evidence of a very specific form of boundary breaking, of exceeding the frame, one that is exemplified by Eduardo Roca (Choco) Salazar's contribution, Caribbean Dream. According to his biography, Choco's work, "focuses on the faces of peasants and Afro Cuban women". However, in Caribbean Dream the accusing gaze of an androgynous figure confronts us, desexualized despite its apparent nudity. The work is vibrant and aggressive, jumping from the canvas in scratches and areas of oil build-up.

This is a craftsman exploiting his medium to its most passionate extent. The figure's gaze is questioning, potentially accusatory, but at the same time, confounding. No one interpretation of the prone figure holds fast. Choco confronts us with a mash of cultural allusions (Picasso and Ofili being difficult comparisons to avoid), and yet none quite accounts for the power of the piece, nor quite indicates what perspectives and presumptions we should bring to the work in order to decode it. It seems therefore at once traditional – speaking of the peasant lifestyle and native culture – and modern – tapping into the popular post-colonialism of Ofili's bold colours and anti-conventional forms.

The movement beyond the frame that we have made in viewing Caribbean Dream is a movement beyond the single and fleeting moment in which we view the piece. The work's significance extends beyond the moment in which one stands in front of it – its ambiguity is in fact a deliberate removal of time, place and sex. The artist takes us beyond the frame in a nod towards the universality of art. In many ways Beyond the Frame is a celebration of that simple fact. The exhibition celebrates the idea of two men, locked away with seemingly no promise of a fair re-trial, separately discovering the power of art (in whichever form, be it for escapism or the articulation of their suffering).

"The long imprisonment has been defeated by love and art", says Guerrero. Beyond their "framing" by the US government, beyond the confines of their situation, the two Cubans have found an irrepressible means of drawing attention to their situation in the form of art. In this way the diversity (and potential disparity) of the works featured in the exhibition come to signify the enabling process of personal expression through art, regardless of situation.



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## 2 comments

Laz

2 May '12 at 2:43 pm

these guys were spies and no one of them is an artist but pure breed propaganda from a more than 53 years of dictatorship.

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Dodie Weppler

20 May '12 at 11:45 am

This article captures perfectly the aims of the project Beyond the Frame and offers an intelligent and sensitive approach to the artwork in the exhibition. It demonstrates a real capacity to combine an appreciation of the politics brought to the gallery space (with the display of artwork by two Cuban nationals unjustly imprisoned) with a distinct and meaningful interpretation of Choco's Caribbean Dream. V. interesting links noted! Thank you!

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