

Sequence: A Study of Actions and Reactions in Havana, Cuba

The Fototeca de Cuba started as an idea in 1982 and officially became the Cuban National Center for Photography four years later after splitting from the National Museum of Fine Arts. It inherited a collection of more than 80,000 images of different photo-types, including photos from the 19th century and many important Cuban authors. Over the course of my three months in Cuba I observed two very distinct exhibitions in the second-floor space of this gallery. Within the first couple weeks of my arrival I met Ricardo López Arias, a Panamanian photographer, and Maylin Pérez Parrado, a Cuban-born curator who now lives in Holland. I spent some time with these two in the preparation process of López Arias's first Retrospective exhibition, which was displayed from February 22 to March 22, 2019. Immediately upon walking into the space I was struck by the intense gaze of a young child staring back at me from across the room. The child in this photo, who appeared to make eye contact with the viewer, was facing towards the right, which encouraged me to continue walking around the space in this direction. As I transitioned around the room from photo to photo, there was a clear but smooth transition between photos of people or replications of people to photos of the land, which is easily interpreted as the "patria," since this word exists in one of the two color photographs in a show otherwise composed entirely of black and white images. Creating a sense of connection through the photos of humans first more easily let me continue this connected feeling with the photos of the "homeland." As I continued to circle around the space, I was greeted by photos of textures and shadows, and I started to conduct my own personal scavenger hunt for the human aspects within them. One relationship between the form of two photos that I particularly enjoyed was between a photo of a dead bird's feet and a photo of human feet in a similar position. When looking at the bird's feet on the ground shot from above, we immediately assume that the bird is dead. When seeing the backs of human feet layered on top of each other in the same fashion, we assume that the person is sleeping, but placing these photos almost next to each other, separated only by the other sole color photo in the show (a shot of an old, discarded directory), we question the state of the human. What did this person do to deserve to be compared to a dead bird? This deliberate sequencing of two similar forms creates a conversation between the two photos' contents. Rounding the fourth corner of the room, there was a small collection of photos from the construction of the Panama Canal, followed by another stark portrait of a man staring directly into the camera. The position of this photo seemed slightly jolting, but sometimes when creating a sequence, interrupting a preconceived flow is necessary. Turning points keep viewers interested and help emphasize a certain part of a sequence. Overall, I interpreted this sequence as a prompt to ponder how humans interact with one another and to an environment, rather than a possibly more sterile chronological arrangement as López Arias's exposition included photos from a span of at least 30 years...

EMMA SYMANSKI