

- ARTS EVENTS
- FEATURES ARCHIVES
- MOVIE SHOWTIMES
- MOVIE TICKETS
- MOVIE REVIEWS
- VISUAL ART REVIEWS
- THEATER REVIEWS
- CL HOME

**CONTRIBUTORS**

- CL ON YOUR MOBILE
- SIGN UP FOR EMAIL
- GET TXT MSGS

**LINKS**

- ARTWORLD SALON
- SALON | ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT
- SLATE | CULTUREBOX
- THE DAILY BEAST BUZZ BOARD
- ARTS COUNCIL OF HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY
- CULTURAL AFFAIRS PINELLAS COUNTY
- FLORIDA DIVISION OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS
- TAMPA BAY ARTS
- BLOGSITE THEATER
- HUFFINGTON POST | ENTERTAINMENT
- NY TIMES BOOK REVIEW
- NY TIMES ARTSBEAT
- AMERICAN STAGE BLOG
- BLUELUCY
- CREATIVE TAMPA BAY
- VULTURE
- EW.COM

Arts: Features  
**Hands On/Hands Off**  
 By [Mary Mulhern](#) Published 04.13.05

The white canvas walls of "Transportable City" ripple slightly, the breeze passing through open windows. Defying the laws of perspective, the city seems to grow smaller as you approach. Still, this ghostly tent city is playfully inviting. The child-scaled buildings make infinite imagining possible. Loosely modeled after Havana's public buildings, each minimal tent is the basic archetype of any town's church, factory, school. The city's appearance on the lush campus lawn transports you. This outdoor installation is a light appetizer to be savored before continuing on to the weighty main course of *Los Carpinteros: Inventing the World* at the University of South Florida's Contemporary Art Museum. Co-curated by director Margaret Miller and curator of education Noel Smith, the exhibition shows the work of the young Cuban collaborative Los Carpinteros.



GHOST TOWN: "Transportable City" at sunset.



Even before entering the galleries, the hint of claustrophobia stirred by the miniature buildings blossoms into full-blown paranoia. "The Watchtowers" just outside the museum entrance, though built of delicate aluminum and gauzy bottle green polycarbonate, have an undeniable menace. They are modeled after police guard towers seen on some Havana streets.

Marco Castillo, Dagoberto Rodriguez and Alexandre Arrechea met as art students at Havana's Superior Institute of Art in the early 1990s. Sharing similar skills, humor and conceptual interests, they fell naturally into a collaborative trio. Classmates dubbed them "Los Carpinteros" because they worked primarily with wood. They humbly accepted the name, as inheritors of a long artisan tradition in Cuba. Havana in the 1990s offered little in the way of materials. The artists harvested woodwork from abandoned mansions surrounding the art school. Early works in the show, "Havana Country Club" and "Cuban Cigar Label," are paintings framed with this salvaged colonial woodwork.

Accepted quickly into the Havana art world, Los Carpinteros continued to work with their hands, but the work became increasingly conceptual. They turned out drawings and objects that were intellectually complex and informed both by Cuban politics and the international art scene. Travels and residencies in Spain, South America and the United States exposed them to wider audiences, and their work is now known and collected throughout the world.

While each work begins with a utilitarian identity, the process and end products have become increasingly complex. Irresistibly tactile, their constructions have complex shapes, working parts and exquisite surfaces. "Jewelry Case" (1999) is a grenade-shaped wooden cabinet with dozens of drawers begging to be opened. Installed at the entrance to the exhibition, this impressive labor is one of the last pieces to be made solely by the hands of the artists.

Constants of every work in *Inventing the World* are tension and irony: the unworkable utilitarian object made with infinitely fine craftsmanship; the impossibly long wooden drawer that can never be closed in its filing cabinet. Each piece is a paradox - swimming pool/ice rink, a sofa seat/gas burners, jewelry box/hand grenade.

The jokes are one-liners - the point they're making can seem all too obvious. But that's the way it is in an oppressive society. Things are never what they seem; the dream of an ideal plan always has a nightmare flip side. These pieces don't allow the viewer to escape the constraints of everyday living in Cuba.

Still, Los Carpinteros' message is often little more than that reminder. I'm guessing their work will deepen beyond simple dualities as they mature. After all, they've only been out of art school for a decade.

Today Los Carpinteros' sculpture and installations are almost entirely outsourced for fabrication. The carpenters have become designer/architects. In Cuba, where everything is in short supply, it was natural for them to import materials and export their ideas for construction. They continue to collaborate, but now it is with workshops such as Graphicstudio and architects and commercial fabricators in Brazil and California. For the work "Sandal," the crew at Graphicstudio worked through the elaborate process of editioning rubber sandals, from the artists' drawings, to 3-D modeling, printing and shoe making.

The artists' works on paper - watercolors, prints and drawings - though beautifully realized, remain working drawings. Their import now is primarily functional, rather than esthetic. The drawings also maintain the artists' tenuous connection to handwork.

Whether or not Los Carpinteros build the objects themselves, their vision remains formally precise and emotionally gripping. Through design they manage to work in a huge variety of materials that

**TOOLS**

- Save this story
- Email this story to a friend
- Print this story

- [del.icio.us](#)
- [digg](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Reddit](#)

**MORE BY THIS AUTHOR**

- The Museum, Cubed**  
A rush to judgment, then cautious optimism, about the proposed new site.
- Power couple**  
A marriage of paintings and textiles with roots in Native American culture
- Right On Target**  
The Artillery mounts a joyful, pop-infused show at Covivant.

**PREVIOUSLY**

- Gasparilla Guide 2011: Gasparilla 2010 was wet but still wild**  
Whether you enjoy it or avoid it, the time has come for Tampa's annual Gasparilla Pirate Fest. H...
- John Waters, role model**  
Just about anyone who digs outsider moviemaking has drunk from the deliriously demented well of film...
- OPENING. SURREALLY.**  
SUN. JAN. 9 (Dia de Fantasia Members-Only Preview Party) 11 a.m.-12 p.m. Zodiac and Upp...

**MORE ARTS**

- Upcoming A&E SPECIAL EVENTS 2011**  
Tampa Bay Living Green Expo Showcase of sustainable products and services. E...
- Theater review: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?**  
Several years ago, the Polish critic Jan Kott published a book called *The Theatre of Essence*, and ev...
- Photo Issue 2011: Studio portraits**  
Whether housed in an empty storefront, a spare room or a rehabbed historic building, artists' st...

VF DAILY  
VARIETY  
TELEVISION WITHOUT  
PITY  
BRAND TAMPA  
GAWKER  
GUERNICA MAGAZINE  
CULTUREGRRL

they often have not physically touched, though their mark is inimitable.

The most perfectly constructed piece in the show is "Breadbox," made of maple wood. In Los Carpinteros' spirit of equality and respect for craftsmen, I credit the cabinetmaker: Bob Ballard, who built this flawless piece at his Tampa workshop Environ Studios. It's a loaf of bread/it's a missile. It's collaboration.

[mary.mulhern@weeklyplanet.com](mailto:mary.mulhern@weeklyplanet.com)

### YOUR COMMENT

Preview Comment