

# SEANKELLY

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**VOICE**

## Los Carpinteros Moonwalk through the Crack-up

A communist party

Jimmy Breslin was right: There is no more beautiful sight than a heaving street full of people. In Havana, on a sun-baked afternoon, that sensuous humanist observation goes double. Picture a Times Square flash mob mugged by the hurly-burly of New Orleans' scrappy Treme.

For those who haven't visited Fidel's island, a current show at Chelsea's Sean Kelly gallery opens a window onto some of its special genius, while also offering what scholarly types might term a critical history. Courtesy of two of Cuba's greatest living artists, the duo Los Carpinteros, this exhibition—besides holding up a convex mirror to carnival culture—takes a local view of a spiny global phenomenon: the epochal disillusionment that replaced the Left's hopes and dreams for billions of Cold War losers around the world.

A jolt felt intensely from Cambridge to Chongqing, utopianism's sudden ebb hit many intellectuals, writers, and artists in the United States and Europe like heroin withdrawal. But if cold turkey for the likes of Sean Penn and Naomi Wolf meant a short stint at Western liberalism's Hazelden clinic, their Cuban counterparts, along with the island's doctors, barkeeps, and street sweepers, continue to inhabit a nightmare scenario straight out of the film *Juan of the Dead*. Condemned to inhabit a country where escape from history is simply not possible, Cubans now—like many Russians, Chinese, Venezuelans, Iranians, and others—pass their days like zombies, not fully inhabiting this century's ambitions and never resurrecting the glories of the century that passed.

This, in a nutshell, is the philosophical limbo explored by Los Carpinteros, whose eminently practical name means "The Carpenters." Committed to untying our time's knotty cultural and political contradictions, the creative team of Marco Antonio Castillo and Dagoberto Rodríguez has become expert at examining hallowed public images, then turning them on their heads. (Alexandre Arrechea, a third original member who left the collective in 2003, recently commandeered Park Avenue's medians with irreverent sculptures of Manhattan skyscrapers.) Los Carpinteros' latest New York exhibition continues the group's reconstruction of public propaganda. Pace Arthur Koestler, their sculptures constitute mostly anti-monuments to the God that failed.

Consider the large, Lego-brick-covered memorials inside Sean Kelly's main gallery. Inspired directly by Communist-era megaliths, these include a flying black wedge based on a cement Cyclops originally erected in the former Yugoslavia to commemorate WWII victims; a yellow upside-down Nike swoosh that mimics Moscow's existing Monument to the Conquerors of Space; and a red-and-black version of the UFO-like building that currently houses St. Petersburg's State Scientific Center for Robotics and Technical Cybernetics. Built in wood and

finished in toy pieces, these adaptations of Soviet-era architectural futurism bristle with Borat-type buffoonery. These Legoland shapes appear on the verge of revealing some unspeakable historical gaffe: *Wawaweewa!*

Also inside the same space (the gallery's exhibition areas run to XL size) are two aluminum wall portraits that acidly satirize the Brobdingnagian silhouettes of revolutionary icons Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos installed in Havana's Plaza de la Revolución since 1995. Unlike the regime's billboard-size representations, which serve as backdrops for rallies and official events, the backlit silhouettes created by Los Carpinteros celebrate flesh-and-blood survivors of what the artists call "Cuba's real lost generation." Portraits of two elderly adherents of the revolution, they also happen to be likenesses of Rodriguez's mother and Castillo's grandfather.

In an adjacent gallery is the installation *Tomates*, a work that conflates political protest with Spain's Tomatina, the fruit-tossing celebration now commercialized in Ray-Ban and Pepsi spots: It includes 250 porcelain tomatoes mock-smashed against several walls. But the group's genuine *pièce de résistance* is displayed downstairs as a video. An electrifying multi-camera recording of one of the greatest art performances in history, Los Carpinteros' *Conga Irreversible* features choreographers, musicians, and some 50 costumed dancers playing, singing, and dancing backward. Performed originally last September at the Havana Biennial along the mile-long Paseo del Prado, the work literalizes Cuba's backward lurch with precise, bittersweet, hip-shaking panache.

Don't miss it. Jimmy Breslin would have been goggle-eyed.