

Elizabeth Mesa-Gaido

In the early 1960s, my parents and many relatives migrated to the US from Cuba as political exiles. This occurrence influenced the course of my artwork. From 1990-2000, I created mixed-media sculptures and multi-media installations for the *Immigration Series*, which explores issues of cultural identity, history, immigration, assimilation, and marginality. This brought me to understand cultural migration on a personal level, and I highlighted the importance of diversity to a larger audience. Feeling I had thoroughly addressed the concept of cultural identity, I dramatically changed the direction of my work, creating whimsical textile sculptures for another decade.

I traveled to Cuba for the first time in January of 2011 with my immediate family members to visit Havana and meet relatives who chose to stay behind. Despite my belief that I had long ago moved away from creating work about Cuban lineage, I returned to the US inspired by this life-changing experience.

Cuban-American Piñatas responds to my witnessing a sea of commodities, medicines, and food being carried into Cuba in suitcases by US visitors to assist those who have no access to necessary daily items. Suspended from the ceiling are eight papier-mâché cardboard suitcases covered with adhered strips of hand-cut tissue paper. Instead of candy, a mound of personal supplies like toothpaste, toilet paper, diapers, socks, underwear, and bandages, lies on the ground.

The installation draws attention to the unfavorable conditions in Cuba as a result of

ELIZABETH MESA-GAIDO *Cuban-American Piñatas* Installation view, cardboard, papier mâché, tissue paper, ribbons, glue and purchased commodities, installation dimensions variable, 2012. Detail ABOVE.



sanctions and the government's economic failings. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara's revolution was supposed to rectify economic and social inequality, and yet, five decades later and now under Raúl Castro's governance, these injustices continue while expatriates try to bridge the disparity gap. Foreign remittances (money sent to Cuba by émigrés) are estimated at more than \$2 billion a year by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. The Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy has added another \$2.5 billion in goods, pharmaceuticals, and food—items that the Cuban government taxes heavily.

For the *Then and Now Series*, commodities were photographed and digitally altered using Adobe Photoshop before being printed and heat transferred onto white linen stretched over hand-built wooden frames. Organza was then hand-dyed and/or painted, pleated, and cut into rows, each layer hand-stitched onto the linen to simulate a piñata's surface. The stylized look of Alberto Korda's iconic Che Guevara portrait (1960) was used as a model for digitally manipulating Cuban revolution and government images, which were subsequently heat-transfer printed onto organza panels.

These mixed-media pieces juxtapose the past and present within one work—overlapping history with images that represent the revolution and the hopes that came with it alongside images of items currently in need, brought into Cuba by Cuban-Americans. There is an intentional irony to the representation and cause of elation by two different events 50 years apart. I foresee the continuation of these concepts in my future work, focusing on contrasts between the Cuban government and the basic needs of its citizens.

—Elizabeth Mesa-Gaido is an artist and professor at Morehead State University in Morehead, KY, where her work will be on display in the Annual MSU Art Faculty Exhibition (January 22–February 19, 2014), www.moreheadstate.edu/claypool-young_gallery, www.elizabethmesa-gaido.com

ELIZABETH MESA-GAIDO *Then and Now Series: Bra, Adhesive Bandages, Contact Solution and Cases, Light Bulb, Crackers, and Underwear* Hand dyed and/or painted organza, linen, digital photography, manipulated Cuban revolution and government images, heat transfer printing, wooden frames, each piece 10" x 20.5"; 2012-2013.

