

# PRIVATE AIR

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### HOWARD FARBER

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# ATLANTIC GEMS

INVESTORS CAN'T SEEM TO  
RESIST THE ALLURE OF THE HAMPTONS



OPPOSITE: Howard Farber, retired real-estate investor and co-owner of the Farber Collection of Cuban Art.

*When word first got out that the U.S. was restoring relations with Cuba, Howard Farber's phone started ringing. The art world was buzzing with speculation. What would this mean for the Cuban art market and for U.S. collectors? | By: Mandy Hegarty*

## CUBAN CONTEMPORARY ART: A COLLECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Howard Farber was the right person to ask. Along with his wife Patricia, he owns a valuable collection of 200 or so Cuban contemporary works, and is also the founder of the Farber Foundation, the Cuban Art News website and the Cuban Art Awards. For 14 years now, Farber has been immersed in an art scene, which — thanks to thorny logistics — has remained tantalizingly out of reach for most American collectors. So what did Farber say to the speculators? He predicted a stampede.

### Identifying new markets

If Farber's past experience is anything to go by, it would be wise to take heed of his prognosis. He seems to have a knack for identifying promising markets before the rest of the world cottons on. In the early 1970s, Farber began buying works from American modernist artists from the Stieglitz Circle, such as Georgia O'Keefe. "When I started buying, it wasn't that popular. \$5,000 was my first purchase," says Farber. "Fifteen years later, they are now \$50,000. I really loved the collection but it became difficult to spend \$50,000 on a Saturday taking a walk with my wife on Madison Avenue. Ten years later, they are selling for \$500,000 and I realized at that point that my collecting is over for American modernist painters."

While traveling in 1995, Farber walked into a gallery

in Hong Kong and stumbled upon what would soon be his next art obsession. "I looked on the walls and I started flipping out. I saw things that I never knew existed. Chinese contemporary art." Once again, Farber was ahead of the market. "My accountant said, 'You really have to be out of your mind. You're going to China, you hate to travel, you don't speak Chinese, there is no market and you're spending a lot of money. Why are you doing this?' I said, 'I love the art.' He said, 'That's not a good enough reason.'" Not that Farber let this deter him. Over the next 12 years, he amassed a precious collection of Chinese contemporary works. Prices skyrocketed and in 2007, Farber's collection was sold at Phillips in London in a record-topping auction.

Next in his sights was Cuba. After returning from a tour of the isolated Caribbean nation with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2001, he began conversing via e-mail with a curator in Havana. Farber's interest was kindled and he decided to purchase a drawing or two. "That drawing phase lasted maybe two weeks because I really liked what he chose for me," said Farber. And I said, you know what — let's go! And that was the beginning of a 14-year quest to try and build the best Cuban contemporary art collection in the world and having fun while I'm doing it."




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“I don’t believe in buying only works that I love,” admits Farber. “Sometimes I buy works that I hate. Why? Because they fit into historical perspective.”

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**A collecting vision**

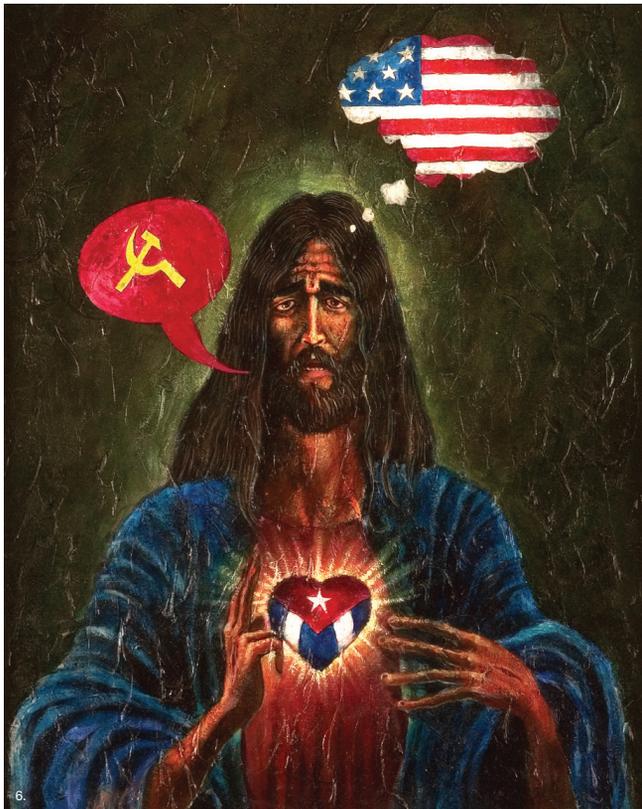
Having limited knowledge of the Cuban art scene, Farber began a speedy process of self-education. “I’ve always worked with curators who would try to educate me and there was an older book on Cuban art that I used to train my eye,” he says. Perhaps more importantly, Farber collected with intent. “My collecting has a vision. And it is to start with the earlier works,” he explains. “With Chinese art, I picked a date, which I thought would be interesting, and that date was 1989, the year of the Tiananmen Square massacre. My thought was the artists are going to really be pumped and they are going to be at their creative best, doing cutting-edge type of work.”

As a starting point for his Cuban collection, Farber fixed on the Special Period — a time of decline following the collapse of the Soviet Union. “In Cuba, the works of the mid 1980s and early 1990s are highly important because of what was happening economically. The artists in the ‘80s and ‘90s, they were very, very poor. Although they might have been well-known in Cuba, they had no money to buy materials. Some of them doing wood sculpture would rob

an abandoned house and take some of the wood from the kitchen to make a piece. And I have these things in my collection. I find it fascinating how they made do with the very little amount of materials that they had.”

Provenance and quality were also hugely important to Farber. “It’s not quantity. It’s not about putting the works on a scale to see how much they weigh. It’s quality,” he says. “And I always wanted the works that were in specific shows in Cuba or traveled to shows around the world. I’m always interested in the back on the painting just as much as I am the front of the painting. Did the artists sign it? Is there a label from a museum? I treat my collection of Cuban art or any of the art I collect like I am a museum.” While trawling Cuba for works for his collection, Farber negotiated with dealers, gallery-owners and artists reluctant to sell because of attachments to their work.

“I don’t believe in buying only works that I love,” admits Farber. “Sometimes I buy works that I hate. Why? Because they fit into historical perspective. In 1990, when people didn’t have enough to eat, a lot of



1. Tania Bruguera  
*Estadística / Statistic*, 1996.  
Sculpture - Human hair, cloth on cardboard,  
70 x 110 cm.
2. Alexis Esquivel  
*Unforgettable*, 2014.  
Painting - oil on canvas  
195 x 146 cm.
3. Roberto Fabelo  
*Chicharrón*, 2012.  
Painting - Oil on Canvas  
230 x 200 cm.
4. Tonel (Antonio Eligio Fernández)  
*Autoretrato comiéndome una rata / Self-Portrait  
Eating a Rat*, 1997.  
Painting - watercolor and mixed media on paper  
50 x 65 cm.
5. Armando Mariño  
*La Patera / The Raft*, 2002.  
Painting - watercolor on paper  
200 x 150 cm.
6. Lázaro Saavedra  
*El Sagrado Corazón / The Sacred Heart*, 1995.  
Painting - Acrylic on board  
50 x 70 cm.



7. Yoan Capote  
*Protocolo / Protocol*, 2000-2001.  
18 x 44 x 19 in.  
Sculpture - Cast iron, red velvet

8. Carlos Estevez  
*A través del universo*, 1992  
Sculpture - Wood, fabric, candle and glass eyes.  
79 x 157.5 x 12 in.

9. Juan Pablo Ballester  
*Untitled (More than you expect series)*, 1994.  
160 x 180 cm.  
Photography - color print

the works dealt with some of those things and they are not pretty. I have works that I can't hang in my dining room. But they are historically important and, if I am the 'museum' that I pretend to be, I need those historical works. And I can never turn one down because it's not palatable. It could be totally cutting edge, totally offensive, but it's what these artists felt of the government. It's what these artists felt in their heart. And why should that be lost? It's a part of history."

**Collecting in Cuba**

Farber is confident that Cuban contemporary art is "the art world's best kept secret," saying, "For collectors, it's an amazing opportunity. I see the next big thing as Cuban contemporary art and I've been around for a long time."

For art collectors considering this route, there are misconceptions that need to be quashed. "They think in their minds — and I'm talking about very sophisticated collectors — that it is basically a man with a guitar and a cigar in his mouth or a 1940s poster of Carmen Miranda in one of the old hotels. It couldn't be further from the truth," he asserts. "You're dealing with sculpture, photography, video,

you're dealing with every medium known. You're dealing with artists who have shows at the Tate. One Cuban artist had a big show in the museum in Dublin. They are at the Venice Biennale. We're talking about a highly sophisticated group of artists."

He advises new-to-the-scene collectors to look up galleries online, gather catalogues, study images and even embark on art tours. And when they are ready to make a purchase, push the budget. "Buy what you can afford, and overextend if you can by a little bit. I've always done that," says Farber. "I would wind up trading three pictures and giving money to get a better work. So when I eventually sold my collection, I only had six to eight works, but every one of them is in a museum."

With the influx of buyers expected to flock to this little nation, there have been concerns about how insatiable demand may affect the quality of output or drive another market bubble. While Farber concedes, "There is always a fear that people will get greedy," he places little stock in this hypothesis. "But I haven't seen it yet. The prices are starting to go up but at such a small degree. I was in Havana in October and I was there a few

weeks ago and I tell you that the quality is not suffering... The artists in Cuba are aware of different art markets and they know what happened to the Chinese market," says Farber, adding, "I must say, the same things were said about Andy Warhol. He is making too many works that all look alike, and now he's one of the top five American artists."

One thing that is certainly sure is that Cuba's art scene is changing. When we spoke, Farber had returned from a trip just a few weeks prior, commenting, "I saw the people have a different attitude since I was there in October. They are so hopeful. The artists don't know what has happened. They don't know what has hit them and it's amazing."

As a champion of Cuban art and culture, it is only fitting that Farber would feel particularly moved by the announcement of warming relations. "On December 17, I'm here in Miami and President Obama gets on television and says he wants to normalize relations with Cuba. I had to sit down because I got a tear in my eye. I thought it really wouldn't happen in my lifetime and it's happened." ✈