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WKU showcases Cuban culture with art exhibition, upcoming lecture

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Art pieces from Cuba exhibited on Wednesday, February 13, 2019, at the Ivan Wilson Fine Arts Center. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

When Miwon Choe, an art education professor at Western Kentucky University, set out to bring an exhibition of Cuban art to campus, she wanted to give an unvarnished look into the artists' lives.

The result is a mix of paintings by Cuban artists of all walks of life, from children to adults in their 70s. Choe sees their resourcefulness, determination and openness on display.

“The resilience and the perseverance of their spirit is amazing,” she said, adding that the exhibit is their way of building bridges with America. “Although it is figurative, I think this is a way that they want to cross.”

After first visiting Cuba in 2004, Choe said the exhibition in the Fine Arts Center's main and corridor galleries has been years in the making. Starting around 2010, the project called “The Island of My Love: The Faces and Stories of Cuba” grew out of her friendships with Cubans. It's on display until April 5.

The exhibition is part of the International Year of Cuba at WKU. The ongoing series spotlights a country each year and promotes its history and culture with academic courses, events and even study abroad opportunities.

On Thursday, American-Cuban anthropologist Ruth Behar will speak on campus in FAC's Russell Miller Theater at 5 p.m. Behar is the author of “Lucky Broken Girl,” which tells the story of Behar's childhood in the 1960s growing up in New York City as a Cuban-Jewish immigrant.

“The theme of it is creating bridges through literature and the arts,” Choe said of the talk.

Despite Cuba's proximity to the U.S., Choe said many Americans still lack an understanding of the island nation, viewing it only from one lens.

“It's been so far away from our own understanding of who they are,” she said.

Victoria Layne, a WKU graduate who manages the gallery at the Fine Arts Center, said she see many layers to the collection.

“Not only do you have pieces from artists who are really good at what they they do, but you have student works who are just like so full of life and thoughtfulness,” she said, adding that viewers can’t help but feel overwhelmed with “appreciation for their way of life.”

While Cubans are free to express themselves through art, Choe said, materials are often hard to come by. There aren’t any convenient art supply stores, she said.



“They just create art with whatever they can find,” she said. “That’s pretty amazing considering how difficult it is to obtain materials. ... I honestly don’t know where and how they get it.”

The work of a husband and wife photography duo is also on display in the exhibition. Called the String Project, it depicts a series of portraits of Cubans holding a white rope that runs through each photograph. Choe described the rope, which is also on display, as a symbol of connection.

Sandra Carter, an instructor at WKU and former Warren Central High School teacher, said she was somewhat hesitant when she got the chance to travel to Cuba with Choe. But that changed when she met art students there and saw how advanced their skills were.

“I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that they don’t have a lot to work with. So they have to make the best use of what they have,” she said.

While at WCHS, Carter taught a class that paired literacy and arts education for students with low-level reading skills. Part of that class included a pen pal program with students in Cuba, Carter said. Her students who previously hated reading suddenly had something to look forward to, she said.

“My students that were low-level students they were just like ‘Wow, somebody from Cuba wrote me a letter. They care enough for me to respond?’ ” Carter said.

“They wanted to read what these students had to say,” she said.

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