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LOS CARPINTEROS

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FAENA ARTS CENTER
by Lilly Wei



BUENOS AIRES The Cuban duo Los Carpinteros (Marco Antonio Castillo Valdés and Dagoberto Rodríguez Sánchez) brought large installations to the grand Sala Molinos (6,800 square feet, 30-foot ceilings) of the Faena Arts Center, a new contemporary art venue in Buenos Aires. Theirs was the second exhibition at the former flour mill, which opened last year with a sitespecific installation by Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto. As always, Los Carpinteros' sculptures were meticulously crafted, evidencing their long-standing interest in architecture and design. Concerned with sociopolitical issues as much as modernist esthetics, the pair champion manual labor and artisanal process over industrial production. They subordinate individual authorship in the guild tradition, and frequently question the inequities of self-centered global consumerism.

Los Carpinteros, who now spend much of their time outside Cuba, presented three projects. *Avião* (Plane), made in Brazil in 2011 and recalling Cai Guo-Qiang's arrow-studded tigers and Chinese boat, consists of a Piper Comanche—a single-engine private plane of a type discontinued in 1972—riddled with so many feathered arrows that it might be a new species of bird. *El Barrio* (2007) comprises pristine cardboard boxes, each the size of a toddler's playhouse, with a cutout doorway and windows. Dwarfing the plane, *El Barrio* rose toward the ceiling in a precarious-looking jumble that evoked slum housing on the verge of collapse, albeit in an archetypal version that is elegantly minimalist.

The third work, *Alumbrado Público* (Street Light), 2012, is more disturbing than the other two. It also towers upward, more or less to scale, resembling a long row of sleek, silvery light posts connected at their bases by a serpentine network of tubing, as though the fixtures had sprouted thick roots. The work is an example of the artists' signature disruption of the ordinary, in which humor is edged with menace.

This exhibition highlighted structures for practical use—transport, housing, security—in forms that should be functional but are not. The three works offered a wry sociological commentary on flight, blight and light, on social engineering and its limitations. Pierced by arrows, which represents an outdated technology, the vintage Comanche aircraft evokes regression or stasis, progress thwarted. The barrio houses are stripped down, unsettled, made of disposable materials. Even the tall, slender street lamps are ineffective, their glow diminished by the brightness of the sunlit gallery, their efficacy seemingly compromised by a surrealistic miscegenation with nature.

Emblems of street safety, the lights also aid surveillance. All three works contain their own contradictions and inutility, their own dysfunction—a subversion of design signifying, perhaps, the failures of Cuba's socialist experiments. Change might be coming, but it is change that remains hard to believe in.

Photo: View of Los Carpinteros' Avião (foreground), 2011, and El Barrio (background), 2007; at Faena Arts Center.