

Artner, Alan G. "Balancing Seriousness with Humor: Works of Los Carpinteros Crossbreed Unlikely Forms," *Chicago Tribune*, January 26, 2006.



## **Balancing seriousness with humor**

### **Works of Los Carpinteros crossbreed unlikely forms**

January 26, 2006 | By Alan G. Artner, Tribune art critic.

At the beginning of the 1990s, three male students at the Superior Institute of Art in Havana spontaneously banded together to do collaborative projects that were at once craftsmanlike, conceptual, local, social and witty. Because they initially worked with wood, they were called "Los Carpinteros" ("the Carpenters").

The artists -- Alexandre Arrechea, Marco Castillo, Dagoberto Rodriguez -- worked together in imitation of a guild for more than 12 years, creating objects that brought them worldwide attention. Although Arrechea left in 2003, he is still a contributor to the works in "Los Carpinteros: Inventing the World," the lively survey of more than a decade of their wry, accessible pieces that recently opened at the Chicago Cultural Center.

The earliest works on view, from 1993 and 1994, include representational paintings within carved wood surrounds, which cleverly play with Cuban middle-class taste of a bygone time as well as draw inspiration from such indigenous sources as Cuban cigar labels. These are the most luxurious pieces; thereafter, the look becomes increasingly tougher, leaner.

Painting dropped out of the work soon enough, to be replaced by drawings in pencil, ink and watercolor. Some were preparatory, others were done directly on walls, as backdrops for sculptural objects. But the kind most plentiful in the exhibition are finished works of art in themselves, with themes often falling into the categories of home, water and architecture.

Those themes are, however, treated with the humor that comes from small objects (beach sandals) being greatly enlarged or public creations (pools, planes, skyscrapers) being crossed with domestic objects (appliances, furniture). An element of cheeky surprise also comes from enlarging and elevating humble materials -- corrugated boxes, cinder blocks, pipes -- into almost heroic pictorial subjects.

Los Carpinteros' sculptures follow a similar development, as small objects (say, a hand grenade) take on Brobdingnagian proportions and are crossbred with unlikely forms (a chest of drawers). Here the artists also sometimes meld characteristics of two perfectly functional objects, such as a sofa and electric range, making the hybrid useless but gaining the physical realization of a pun: the hot seat.

Such fun masks more serious thoughts about contemporary life in Cuba, for however broad and international the works' humor, the core remains local and reflective of conditions that are the strongest at home in Havana. All the works have this duality and can mean distinctly different things depending on the nationality of the viewers. The achievement is in how the meanings exist concurrently, in balance, with neither one overpowering the other.

It remains to be said that both the sculpture and drawings are persuasively, even beautifully, executed, and that adds to their appeal. We are, after all, in a conservative time when, once again, academic values count.

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"Los Carpinteros: Inventing the World/Inventar el mundo" continues at the Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St., through April 2; a preview, talks and a forum will take place at, respectively, 5:30 p.m. Feb. 3; 12:15 p.m. Feb. 9 and March 16; and 6 p.m. March 8. 312-744-6630.