

SEANKELLY

Stolz, George. "Seeing Double," *ARTnews*, June 2013.

**ARTnews**

S E E I N G  
DOUBLE

Dream logic, impossible combinations, and visual puns fill the work of Cuban sculpture duo Los Carpinteros

BY GEORGE STOLZ



GILOS CARPINTEROS/COURTESY USF CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM, TAMPA AND SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK



**OPPOSITE** *Ciudad Transportable*, 2000, installed at the 7th Havana Biennial, became key to Los Carpinteros's career. **ABOVE** The artists, Dago Rodríguez and Marco Castillo (right), with *Conga Irreversible* performers in 2012.

At the 11th Havana Biennial in May 2012, the Cuban artist duo known as Los Carpinteros staged a curious and complex performance titled *Conga Irreversible*. Involving nearly 100 dancers, musicians, choreographers, composers, and costume designers, *Conga Irreversible* consisted of a traditional Cuban carnival street procession, known as a *comparsa*, performed along Havana's famous Paseo del Prado—but performed, bewilderingly, in reverse. Drummers and horn players played their intricate parts backwards while withdrawing down the center of the crowded street. Singers sang inverted melodies and reversed lyrics. Dancers executed their elaborate movements in reverse through the colonial center of the city all the way to the seaside Malecón. Even the dancers' somber black outfits functioned as a reversal of the *comparsa's* traditional brightly colored costumes.

While the reactions of passersby ranged from amusement to astonishment, the implications of the anything-but-innocent metaphor were not lost on the Cuban public: Cuban socialism has often proclaimed

itself “irreversible” in the inexorable forward march of history, yet much of the daily Cuban reality can seem trapped in the past. Nevertheless, despite its subtext, the piece retained an infectious carnival spirit, delighting the crowds that trailed it along the boulevard. *Conga Irreversible* encapsulated many of Los Carpinteros's trademark elements: meticulous execution, surrealistic juxtapositions and incongruities, deftness with the delicacies of allegory, an unshakeable rootedness in Cuban culture, and above all, a sly and playful sense of humor.

Los Carpinteros—41-year-old Marco Castillo and 43-year-old Dagoberto Rodríguez—have been working as a team since the early 1990s (a third original member, Alexandre Arrechea, left the group in 2003 to pursue a solo career). Native Cubans, they met in Havana in the 1980s at the prestigious art school Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA). Cuba was then entering what came to be

*George Stolz is an ARTnews contributing editor and Madrid correspondent.*

known as the “Special Period,” a time of extreme austerity provoked by the fall of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of the Soviet economic support on which Cuba had come to rely.

Basic commodities were scarce; poverty and hunger were rampant; and art supplies, even brushes and paints, were hard to come by. So the three students frequently availed themselves of wood, one of Cuba’s few abundant resources, either by salvaging it from empty buildings or, in some cases, cutting down trees themselves and working the wood with old-fashioned hand tools and the techniques they’d learned from local artisans. As a result, their fellow students began referring to them as “the carpenters”—Los Carpinteros, in Spanish—and the name stuck.

But Los Carpinteros’s decision in 1994 to eschew individual authorship and to sign all of their artworks as a collective also rested on what was a shared and articulated conviction that art always, to some degree or another, involves a measure of collaboration. And that collaboration might take physical as well as intellectual, and/or conceptual form.

“Even a painter who says he spends all his time alone in his studio, making work that he says is entirely his own—it’s not true,” Rodríguez points out, speaking from the collective’s studio in Madrid,

**Los Carpinteros’s  
*Tarima Lunar*, 2010, a  
collaborative drawing  
inspired by Cuban  
architecture and craft.**

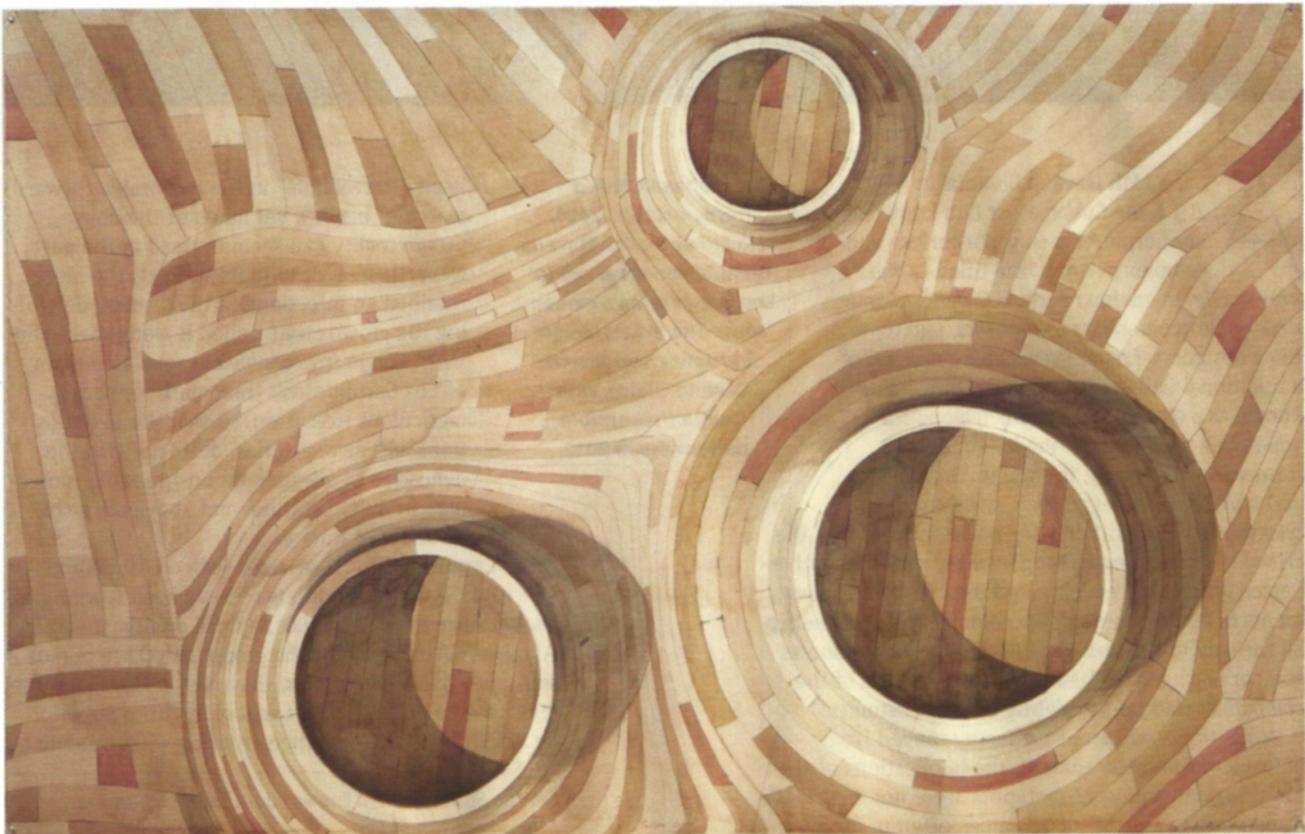
where they now reside. “There is always a web of influences, of knowledge, of history, even of something as simple as supplies. Nothing exists alone, in art or anywhere else. It’s a matter of practical necessity.”

In the later 1990s, Los Carpinteros developed a distinctive style that centered on collective paintings, drawings, and sculptures, and derived its visual vocabulary from Cuban architectural and vernacular imagery, which the artists often treated with an oblique irreverence. This period coincided with Cuba’s opening up to the West, with a consequent inflow of tourism revenue. The trio’s work, which appeared in various editions of the Havana Biennial, began to be noticed by international curators visiting Cuba.

Los Carpinteros had their first show outside of Cuba in 1995, at London’s Whitechapel Gallery, in the exhibition “New Art from Cuba,” and were later included in the group show “Domestic Partnerships,” at Art in General in New York in 1996.

But the work that definitively launched Los Carpinteros onto the international art-world stage was *Ciudad Transportable* (Transportable City), a large-scale installation presented at the 7th Havana Biennial in 2000. It was to become key to their subsequent career and much of their later work.

*Ciudad Transportable* consists of ten white nylon tents stretched over aluminum frames. The tents are models of basic building types—church, factory,



LOS CARPINTEROS/COURTESY SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK



**Güiro, 2012, an art-bar installation presented at Art Basel Miami, was inspired by the güiro, a Cuban percussion instrument made from the shell of a tropical fruit.**

hospital, apartment building—and were based on existing structures in Havana, such as the Capitol (which was modeled on the U.S. Capitol building) and one of the nation’s infamous prisons, Presidio Modelo.

With its participatory element—visitors could stroll freely in and out of the tents—and its contingent architectural character, *Ciudad Transportable* easily fit in with international art currents of the moment. Meanwhile, on a formal level, especially in terms of craft, it earned comparison with the work of Donald Judd and Richard Artschwager. But, at the same time, it related to issues specific to Cuba, such as the deteriorating architectural infrastructure, refuge, and even survival.

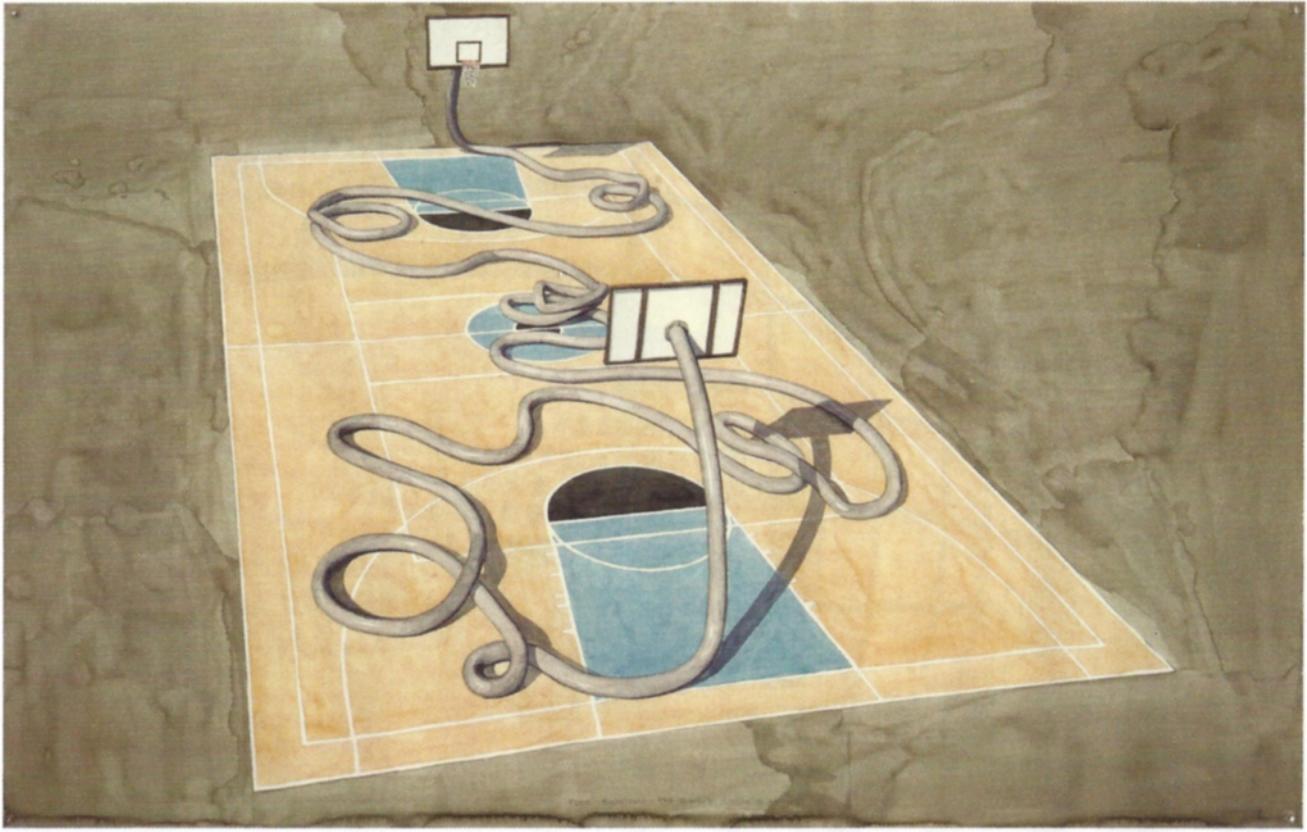
*Ciudad Transportable* later traveled widely (and appropriately, given its format and subject matter) to a variety of venues, such as MoMA P.S.1, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Contemporary Museum, Honolulu (now part of the Honolulu Museum of Art), and the Shanghai Biennale. And in the process, Los Carpinteros, with their Cuban-inflected and idiosyncratic blend of art, architecture, and design, became

fixtures on the international art scene.

“What distinguishes them,” says Helen Molesworth, chief curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, “is the way they have a rigorous engagement with historical ideas of utopianism that they combine with a late-20th-century sense of humor.” She adds, “Instead of seeing those social experiments as failures, writing them off, capitulating to cynicism, they are quite energetically engaged.”

Over the years Los Carpinteros’s work has varied in format and subject matter. But it has at its core the large-scale watercolor and gouache drawings for which they are arguably best known. Realist—often even surreal—renderings of objects, their drawings are intricately related to and often presage their three-dimensional work. In addition, the drawings, which the artists say they execute together, function as a way for them to communicate their ideas to each other: “they are the letters we write to each other,” Castillo says.

The team’s sculptures and sculptural installations operate similarly. For instance, a work like *Sala de Lectura* (Reading Room), 2010, derives its form from the architectural panopticon (often used historically in prison design, including in Havana) but the artists transform it



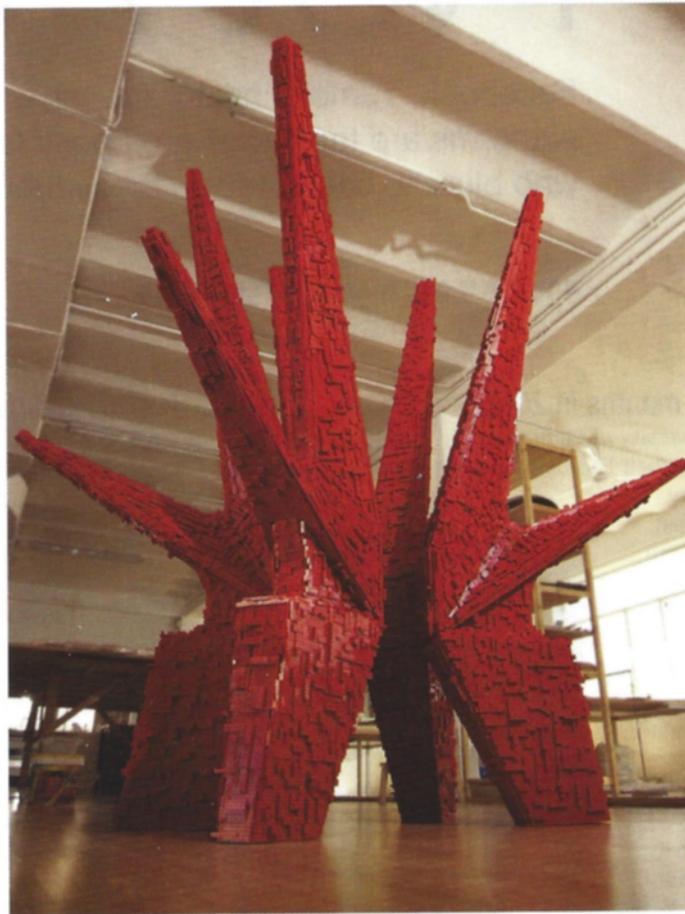
TOP: ©LOS CARPINTEROS/COURTESY SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK; BOTTOM: STEVEN HARRIS/©LOS CARPINTEROS/COURTESY SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK

into a set of intricately assembled wood bookshelves that curve into an enclosed space for reading and storing books. And a recent set of sculptures replicates wildly utopian Soviet buildings, such as the 1964 Monument to the Conquerors of Space, into sculptural models constructed out of Legos. In these works furniture and architecture are reversed, while weighty historical concepts are simultaneously upended and skewered.

"Their work is remarkably complex and layered," says Ian Berry, director of the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, where Los Carpinteros had a solo exhibition in 2010. "First you see one thing in it. Then you see another thing. It really rewards repeated viewing." And, he adds, "it has humor, but it's also provocative; it's poking fun, but all out of a sense of being careful cultural critics. Mixing humor and cultural criticism is a great way of getting their message across."

For Lisa Freiman, senior curator of contemporary art at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, their work is "fantastical, unexpected, intelligent, monumental in its ambition and intention, playful, and inherently surrealistic in sensibility." She adds, "The huge, intricate, and delicate watercolors function much like Claes Oldenburg's early Proposed Monuments Drawings, as propositions for things that could be built, an archive of ideas for future projects."

As in Surrealism and Dada, the visual puns in the art of Los Carpinteros tend to be structured on incongruous or even impossible juxtapositions, such as a bed that doubles as a roller coaster in *La Montaña Rusa* (2008) and the propeller plane riddled with arrows in *Avión* (2011). Such offbeat humor allows the artists to be political without being militant, and to offer subtle critiques rather than full-fledged condemnations. And while they don't necessarily intend everyone to get their jokes—"That would be a luxury," says Castillo—they do see a serious underside to their playful distortions of man-made objects.



**OPPOSITE** *Free Basketball—the same (vista superior)*, 2010, a watercolor study for a sculptural installation created for the Indianapolis Museum of Art's Art & Nature Park (top). *La Montaña Rusa*, 2008, a surrealistic piece that doubles as a roller-coaster and a bed (bottom). **ABOVE** *Kosmaj Toy*, 2012, wittily replicating a utopian Soviet building, is composed of Legos.

In person, Castillo and Rodríguez are affable and upbeat. They habitually finish each others' sentences, like a long-married couple—a comparison they themselves are the first to make. Today, after years of travel from Cuba to their many exhibitions worldwide, Castillo and Rodríguez have settled in Madrid (the city was chosen largely because, as descendents of Spaniards, they were entitled to legal residence in

Spain) with their respective families—both Castillo and Rodríguez are married and have small children. They also maintain a base and studio in Havana. Their Madrid workspace is located in a large, light-filled industrial building in a working-class neighborhood populated mostly by immigrants from Latin America. Today, the building is largely empty, testifying to Spain's precarious economy.

Working full-time in Europe has opened new possibilities for the high-end fabrication of their work, say the artists, who also appreciate Madrid for its clarity of light and the high-speed Internet access that would have been unimaginable in Cuba.

"Like many artists, they began modestly, and then grew in scale as they had more opportunities," Molesworth explains. "But they didn't get big just for big's sake. They've managed to straddle the boundary

between sculpture and architecture with great success."

They are now represented by Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, where their prices range from between €13,000 and €48,000 for works on paper, and €15,000 and €150,000 for sculptures and installations.

Observes Berry, "As specific as their work is to the Cuban context, it also transcends that context." He explains, "It belongs to the wider recent history of drawing, for instance. Or to the recent history of playing with translation and mistranslation. Or with art that demands interaction with its public." ■