

ALL EYES ON HAVANA

She has been called Cuba's Peggy Guggenheim, and he is one of Havana's most prolific artists. Now, **Pamela Ruiz** and **Damian Aquiles** are raising the country's cultural bar with their newly minted Candy Factory.

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE



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As anyone who's anyone who's been to Cuba in recent years will tell you, Pamela Ruiz is the most enthralling hostess Havana has seen since Aline Johnson de Menocal. That said, she's not looking to go down in the history books—at least not exclusively—for entertaining politicians, actors and rock stars at the elegantly appointed turn-of-the-century home she shares with her husband of 20 years, artist Damian Aquiles.

In fact, what's most important to Ruiz, an American art advisor who took up residency on the island nation in the mid 1990s, is leaving a legacy as a cultural connector—one who arranged seminal shoots in Cuba for photographers like Juergen Teller (whom she used to represent), William Eggleston and Philip-Lorca diCorcia; produced major exhibitions with Jack Pierson and Louise Bourgeois; and facilitated countless meetings over the years with Cuban artists and international curators, collectors and critics. She is also the creative force behind Cuba Untitled, an arts and culture nonprofit that will serve as a platform for all kinds of artistic ventures for generations to come.

"The foundation is not mine, it's everybody's. It's there so you can realize whatever project you want to do," says Ruiz, whose most recent splash was the March opening of The Candy Factory, a 10,000-square-foot art studio/exhibition space she and Aquiles carved out of the old Estrella candy factory in Cerro just behind Estadio Latinoamericano.

"This is a gift and I'm very grateful to be given this opportunity after 25 years," says Aquiles, who was painting in a squat in Jaruco when he met Ruiz, with whom he has a teenage son, Bastian, himself an artist currently studying at Wesleyan University. "I want to invite artists to paint with me in the studio and be exposed to different ways of thinking about art."

Aquiles signed a seven-year lease on the

factory and plans to make large-scale sculptures—bigger and bolder than his popular oil drum and "walking man" installations that can be seen on the walls of El Cocinero, Havana's hottest nightclub; in the residences of the Norwegian and Spanish ambassadors to Cuba; and in the Manhattan apartment of philanthropist and collector Beth Rudin DeWoody, who first met Ruiz in 2000.

"Every time I went back Pamela helped organize my trips, introducing me to many interesting artists," says DeWoody, who brought director Robert Wilson one year, which resulted in a residency that summer for Aquiles. "I've watched Damian grow as an artist and I think his work is great."

However, the playing field in Cuba has always been a little unbalanced. "The good thing is that Cuban artists are no longer only beholden to the gallery system to be seen," says Ruiz. "The biggest new development is young artists like Adrián Fernández and Frank Mujica creating these collectives and art spaces and getting known for that. There are so many artists you can see and never even go to a gallery."

The institutional biases may soon be a thing of the past in a post-detente Cuba. Not only did the opening of The Candy Factory roughly coincide with President Obama's visit and the Rolling Stones concert, but it also comes at a moment when Cubans are being allowed for the first time to create their own industries without the state monitoring their every move.

"The Candy Factory is an incredibly expansive space. You walk in and it's completely open with this great white wall that creates an amazing dynamic with the smokestack of the former factory in the background," says Donna De Salvo, deputy director for international initiatives and senior

curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, who traveled down for the opening. "I could certainly imagine a single installation or work of art occupying the entire space, and the indoor/outdoor feel opens up all kinds of possibilities. It's rough, but very elegant at the same time."

Keeping the mandate as wide open as the space is paramount to Ruiz and Aquiles. "We want to create events where an artist in L.A. could bring down some works on a Saturday and leave a week later. It's a big box, and whatever you want to put into it we're open to ideas," she says. "We want to collaborate with people and reach out to the community and figure out who the kids are who may have some real talent but for whatever reason have not been exposed to the arts."

While the focus of the opening was to show a range of Aquiles' work—and give a platform to local artists like Nelson Ramírez de Arellano Conde, Ernesto Leal and Paolo Titolo, whose long-term photographic study of Cuban transvestites Ruiz hopes to make into a book—with the help of Cuba Untitled (and the National Council of the Visual Arts of Cuba, which has given its blessing), it could become Havana's answer to leading artist-run spaces like Dustin Yellin's Pioneer Works in Brooklyn.

"I've been talking to top chefs in New York about doing a cooking school and various film festivals about curating a series in The Candy Factory," says Ruiz. "The Stones are making history in Ciudad Deportiva, Paseo del Prado is being repaved for Chanel, and the Estadio Latinoamericano is completely new. It's moving fast but I'm not worried about Cuba becoming unrecognizable because most people continue to live their lives independently of all these events. I have faith in these people. They will make this a place of endless opportunities."

Damian Aquiles takes a break at the Candy Factory; below, a work in progress.



A HANDFUL OF HAVANA

JOSÉ CARLOS IMPERATORI, OWNER, O'REILLY 304

The Cuban equivalent of André Saraiva, this artist/nightlife curator is behind the best boîte in Havana—as Benicio del Toro and Naomi Campbell can attest. The 10-table speakeasy is filled with paintings and conceptual art by Imperatori (who forged his own Bertoia-esque bar stools out of iron).

RAFAEL "RAFA" MUÑOZ, OWNER, EL COCINERO

The chrome-domed party boy behind the city's premier *terrazza* lounge (atop the now green roof of a former vegetable oil factory) keeps his ties to the art world close by—with a metal wall sculpture by Aquiles and glowing snorkel installation by his childhood pal Arlés Del Rio.

MAYELÍN GUEVARA, JEWELRY DESIGNER

The artist jeweler of the Havana scene, who makes Pop, Art Deco and minimalist pieces from silver and just about any local scrap material she can find (from indigenous nuts and asphalt to Cuban Lego bricks). Her works often appears in design biennials the world over, and she also exhibits locally at the Fábrica de Arte Cubano (FAC), just below El Cocinero.

LEO CANOSA, OWNER, LA MARCA

The creative force behind Havana's first legalized tattoo joint, which has become a hipster enclave with lines out the door (especially when they hold special events that attract the city's top serigraphers to make limited editions prints, which also sell out and draw their own crowds).

CHRISTIAN GUNDÍN GARCIA, OWNER, EL APARTAMENTO

This collector and curator opened Havana's hottest new private exhibition space—with a stellar multimedia show including works by Wilfredo Prieto and Ezequiel Suárez—inside a highrise along the Malecón overlooking the ocean. Expect great things on the horizon with rising young talents like Miguel Alejandro Machado and Victor Piverno on the roster.

HUGO, CARLOS AND CAROLINA CABRERA, LYL CASA, VEDADO

The Cuban-born Cabrera brothers, along with the German-born Carolina, turned a down-at-the-heels Vedado townhouse owned by the family's matriarch, Margarita, into one of the most elegant *casas particulares* in town—fittingly dubbed Live Your Life. European modernist furniture and Cuban art (including three early stitched canvas works by Aquiles) create an inviting atmosphere, while their espresso duets—one with salt, one with sugar—will cure even the worst *resaca* for guests who may have indulged on those never-ending Havana nights.