

'Hollywood in Havana' at PMCA exhibits Spanish-language posters promoting US films as Cuban art

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Starting Sunday, Aug. 20, the Pasadena Museum of California Art presents the exhibition "Hollywood in Havana: Five Decades of Cuban Posters Promoting U.S. Films," showcasing approximately 40 posters advertising iconic movies — most from the capitalist heart of La La Land that were produced from 1960 through 2012. The posters were created by Cuban artists trained at a free, government-sponsored studio in the communist paradise. How the American films got past the US trade embargo against Cuba remains unclear.

Among the posters are bold silkscreen prints publicizing such Hollywood blockbusters as "The Silence of the Lambs" with Anthony Hopkins and Jodie Foster, which won five Academy Awards; and "Schindler's List" directed by Steven Spielberg, which garnered seven Oscars. A few of the posters boost Cuban films, such as a documentary on Marilyn Monroe.

Don't expect to see any images of the late Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro smoking a cigar at this exhibition, scheduled to run through Jan. 7 at PMCA's second floor gallery at 490 E. Union St., Pasadena. Indeed, some of the posters depict decidedly bourgeois fare, like "Singin' in the Rain" with Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds, that might prompt a ghostly denunciation from El Comandante.

There are also edgy posters from the silent screen era like "Modern Times," with Charlie Chaplin, the British comic actor and director whom Susana Smith Bautista, executive director of PMCA, described as a "beloved figure in Cuba" to this day during telephone conversations with the Pasadena Weekly.

"Not all of the art printed (after) the revolution is revolutionary," said Bautista, 50, who grew up in Pasadena and has been to Cuba twice, once for the Havana Biennial in 2000 when she was editorial director of LatinArt.com, a now defunct online journal. "Many artists painted (images) of Cuban culture and Cuban life."

Bautista noted that the exhibition's posters were created with "very strong, bright colors" by artists who came out of the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC), also known as Cuba's national film institute. The revolutionary government established it several months after Castro and his guerilla fighters overthrew the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959 and went on to fuel a new "golden age" in Cuban cinema.

Bautista, who took her mother's Mexican maiden surname long before her marriage to Juan Felipe Vallejo, noted that one of the big ideas of the Cuban revolution was "to bring art forms to the masses" — in tandem with Castro's campaign to end high rates of illiteracy in the Caribbean island nation. Toward that utopian end, ICAIC developed mobile projection units called "cine moviles," trucks which transported film materials to remote areas for free screenings, creating miniature traveling theaters.

"Castro wanted to strengthen the Cuban film industry," Bautista said. "There was a history of films coming from Hollywood to Cuba going back to the 1930s. By founding the institute, Castro recognized the value of film as mass media and mass education. We know there are strong feelings on both sides" of the issue, she added. "We are simply presenting what was happening with Cuban graphic artists in that period."

Asked why none of the posters show the semi-tropical country 90 miles away from the coast of Florida, Bautista replied that PMCA requires that its exhibitions of art, architecture and design show a "California connection." She was not present during the planning for "Hollywood in Havana," which began more than a year before she took the helm at the museum on May 23, succeeding interim executive director Jay Belloli. (Her previous position was director of public engagement at the USC Pacific Asian Museum, located just around the corner from PMCA, on Los

Robles Avenue.)

Last October, PMCA's "Hollywood in Havana" exhibit became a partner of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, a Getty-led initiative involving some 70 arts institutions across Southern California tasked with showing the impact of Latin America on Los Angeles culture. The exhibit, however, was not awarded a grant from the Getty Foundation, but it did receive financial support from the PMCA Board of Directors, the PMCA Ambassador Circle and PMCA's California Visionary Fund, according to museum spokesperson Brianna Smyk, who declined to provide dollar amounts for any of the funding.

"Hollywood in Havana" is the brainchild of its curator Carol A. Wells, founder and executive director of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG) in Culver City, which provided all the posters from its permanent collection. Wells said that one of the differences between American film posters and those from the ICAIC is that the Cuban artwork focuses "more on the theme of a film, what it's about" rather than on the star "which is a US thing. One of my favorites is 'Moby Dick,'" she continued, noting that the image on the poster "shows the tail of a whale. The title and the name of the actor (Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab) are written inside the tail."

How do Hollywood films arrive in Cuba while the US trade embargo against it remains in effect?

Wells said in an email that she has tried to get an answer to that question from people in Cuba and the ICAIC, but the only response she's received thus far is a humorous and cryptic one: "In the revolution, anything is possible." She "assumes" that the films come from other countries, from supporters and from bootlegged copies. "The point of the posters is the same as any other film poster in any other country — to let people know which films are showing. But as the ICAIC posters are works of art in themselves, sometimes better than the films they advertise, the Cuban film poster is in a league of its own."

Film posters have long been popular in Cuba, according to South Pasadena art collector Carrie Adrian, a board member of the South Pasadena Finance Commission and owner of an at home gallery specializing in modern and contemporary Latin American Art. "This is a very famous genre," said Adrian, who traveled to Cuba a half-dozen times before diplomatic relationships between the US and Cuba were restored partially in 2014 by President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro. "I remember seeing poster art in a little studio in Havana. Cubans have loved American cinema before and after the Castros" came to power.

Adrian is a founding member of PCMA's Ambassador Circle and a member of the museum's ¡Fiesta Cubana!, a benefit committee which will hold a gala Oct. 7 to celebrate Cuban history and its affinity for film.

Other travelers attest to Cubans' love of films and note many watch them at theaters that were built in neighborhoods throughout the country during the last century. "In the 1930s and '40s there were more theaters built in Cuba than in any city in the US," said Cuban-born Adolfo J. Nodal, former general manager of the city of Los Angeles' Department of Cultural Affairs and a fundraiser for PMCA.

Nodal visits Cuba almost every month for work on a Cuban public arts initiative aimed at restoring Havana's neon signage that he's spearheading with famed Cuban artist Kadir López Nieves. The project, called Havana Lights, is a non-government entity and will be run by Cuban artists, according to a story appearing last year in the Los Angeles Times.

According to Nodal, a partner in Miami-based Cuban Tours and Travel, the Trump administration hasn't put too much of a crimp on Americans seeking to visit the island. "They've been judicious and kept many of Obama's changes," he said. "You just can't travel there alone."

Nodal predicts that none of the Trump-era restrictions will matter much because, he said, Cuba is changing with a new generation. "People have more liberty. People are starting businesses. I go there nearly every month and I'm shocked to see new buildings. It's off the charts. Cuba is being reborn and nobody can stop it because the Cuban people don't want to stop it. They want change."

"Hollywood in Havana: Five Decades of Cuban Posters Promoting U.S. Films," opens Sunday, Aug. 20, and runs through Jan. 7 at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, 490 E. Union St., Pasadena. For more information, call (626) 568-3665, or visit pmcaonline.org.