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PHOTO BOOK REVIEW

Finding beauty in Cuba's myths, reality

BY ELIZABETH HANLY
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"Cuba is a land born of so much imagination," poet and novelist Antonio José Ponte has said, "that imagination can no longer contain it." All of which may sound hopelessly romantic, at least until one tries to catch hold of the thing called Cuba.

Terry McCoy sets out to do that in a new collection of images and essays titled *Cuba on the Verge: An Island in Transition* (Bulfinch Press, \$50). McCoy, perhaps best known for her award-winning PBS documentaries, has brought together Cuban photographers and writers -- those living on the island, as well as those in exile or born to those who are. She has added the work of several important American photographers and writers to the mix, most notably Sylvia Plachy and Arthur Miller.

Every contributor has an international reputation. Each has been paired -- photographers and writers -- not by bloodline or experience, but rather by fascination for certain themes. Image and word echo, contradict and deepen each other. Indeed, many of McCoy's selections are so strong that she can almost be forgiven her arrogance in dismissing in a few lines nearly every other similar collection on Cuba to date.

Cuba on the Verge begins with an essay by novelist William Kennedy, a highly readable overview of both post-revolutionary history and this book's contents. Referring to Havana -- "the most beautiful city in the hemisphere" -- Kennedy ruminates over "what will be salvaged, what will never be salvaged." McCoy's contributors take on this theme again and again, exploring it as it relates to everything from architecture to faith.

Kennedy poses another question in his introduction: "What am I doing here?" or, rather, why am I drawn here? Or, in the case of some contributors, why do I choose to stay? McCoy may have tried to squeeze her collection into the *Cuba on the Verge* framework -- a framework that pops up from time to time seducing even journalists and editors much more familiar with Cuba than McCoy -- but it is this other theme that is by far the more compelling. It is the one underlying the collection's best work.

MEMORIES, DREAMS

As one would expect, *Cuba on the Verge* explores the experience of the return of children now grown, those who as novelist Acy Obejas describes herself, were "taught to be loyal to someone else's memory."

Massachusetts-based Abelardo Morell works with memory as well, or rather "the half-life of memory." He makes pictures delicate as spider webs. His interiors use camera obscura techniques requiring hours and hours of exposure. He talks of memory as it becomes dream.

The collection moves forward and back between individual dreams and collective ones. Novelist Russell Banks writes of his childhood and his longing for legend, for revolution, or, in this case, the Revolution. He writes of a dream delayed, a journey up into the Sierra Maestra and what he sees from those heights now. Photos by Dartmouth Professor Virginia Beahan accompany the essay. She has captured the island's landscape in images that are nothing less than mythic. Cuba itself becomes sacred space.

Cuba as dream as myth or magic -- it is that sensibility that underpins the peculiarly tactile photographs of René Peña, Kattia García Fayat and Adalberto Roque, all of whom have chosen to remain on the island.

It's there again in the casual intimacy, the oh-so-Cuban blur of bodies in motion recognized by New York-based photographer Plachy. And once more in the ruins of the face of an elderly street performer, a woman on stilts, who as Plachy puts it, ``remembers her whole life in the sway of her body."

New York-based photographer Fazal Sheikh works even more directly with this sensibility. He tracks the island's Creole religiosity, focusing on small details: a single blossom, a white head scarf able quite literally to conjure up a whole cosmology. Sheikh succeeds in making visible that which in Cuba is always just out of sight, waiting through the next doorway.

QUESTIONS

In the midst of things so elusive, where is the reader to find ground? Just what is real? The questions are meaningless to Havana-based poet and novelist Reina María Rodríguez. She writes of an afternoon in a park where there are ``tacos filled with different things (with autumn, winter, nostalgia), everything we are missing, and the children's drums strike up again."

She writes of reclaiming "a park called Faith, Faith Park, even though faith may not exist." Counter to all this are percussive, sassy interviews with Cuban musical legends Chucho Valdés, and NG La Banda's José Luis "El Tosco" Cortés by New York based Hugo Pérez.

McCoy includes several photographic series on Cuba's architecture. Often they chronicle ruins achingly beautiful. The close-ups taken by Havana based Manuel Piña may be the most poignant of all.

So much of this collection is about ruin. Or might it instead be about longing? Poet and novelist Antonio José Ponte tries to answer "why I stay here." He writes about the quality of time, moving through medieval and 20th century philosophy as smoothly as he dances casino.

Finally, almost in passing, he mentions alchemy. An ancient art, alchemy doesn't exist apart from ruins. It is the very ache of lingering over them that brings on the gold. He is talking neither ideology nor psychology. Ponte is talking nothing simple, but rather he is referring to a secret we all barely understand, something humankind seems to hunger for, something that Cuba with all its imagination has always seemed to suggest, never perhaps more than now.

WEAK POINTS

Hardly the stuff of your typical coffee table book. But McCoy's collection goes on.

As it does sadly, it runs adrift

Arthur Miller in his epilogue has little to say about Cuba that hasn't been heard a million times before. But that isn't the collection's most significant flaw.

Leaving aside the whole issue of whether Cuba is "on the verge," it must have been tempting for McCoy to believe that a title so huge -- "transition" -- might allow her to take on every topic she hoped to cover. After all her book, she said, was to be both comprehensive and unique.

But did McCoy understand what Cuba is in transition from? Or what is timeless on the island? Did she understand the crazy weight of Cuba as imagination? Once evoked it takes on a life, a gravity of its own. This much is sure. McCoy didn't understand that for her work to be cohesive she needed to choose between Cuba as imagination and Cuba as fact, or at the very least acknowledge that these are two different species trying to cohabit both her book and Cuba itself. Perhaps that too she didn't understand.

As it is, McCoy has included a series of fine journalistic essays -- one of the best is on the new classism of today's Cuba by New Yorker writer Jon Lee Anderson. But the work is jarring. To go from deep meditation to journalism just doesn't work.

Finally one comes away from what is truly an extraordinary collection half-satisfied, uneasy, caught perhaps as Cuba is caught, in a web of structures that don't quite fit, a nexus where ambition has outrun heart.

Elizabeth Hanly is a Miami-based freelance writer.

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