

Cuban Book Art: Vigía Celebrates 30 Years

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Wooden plaque by Vigía's door. All photographs by Margaret Randall.



San Juan River as seen from Vigía's second floor balcony.

Since December 17, 2014, when US President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro announced the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, interest in our Caribbean neighbor has spiked. For more than half a century, almost since the victory of Cuba's 1959 revolution, US policy toward Cuba has attempted to isolate the country and defeat its independent project of social change. Outright military attack, an economic blockade, illegal acts of sabotage, attempts on Fidel Castro's life, brain drain, the preferential treatment of Cuban immigrants, crop and livestock plagues, and wild rumors have all been used—unsuccessfully—to try to bring the revolution to its knees. Although there are still some diehards in Cuba's exile community and among its extreme Republican backers who would continue the tired Cold War policy, this change promises an opening welcomed by most on both sides of the divide.

Tens of thousands of Americans want to travel to Cuba “before things change.” This is a skewed assumption, because much has already changed, beginning with the 1989 implosion of the socialist bloc.¹ A group of progressive governments throughout Latin America, defiant of US domination, as well as increased trade and travel from almost every country but the United States, has also lessened Cuba’s isolation. When Raul Castro took over from his ailing brother in 2008, he began instituting reforms designed to ease the country toward a mixed economy, while maintaining the most important socialist achievements such as universal healthcare, free education, and subsidized culture and sports.

Cuba continues to change, rapidly. It has been an ongoing and necessary process. Some of those eager to visit simply want to experience the country’s pristine beaches and relatively crime-free environment, enjoy fishing adventures such as the one Ernest Hemingway wrote about in *The Old Man and the Sea*, or sip *mojitos* at La Floridita, the writer’s favorite Havana bar. Others want to invest in new business ventures; US entrepreneurs, alone among those from the more developed nations, have missed out on attractive opportunities to help underwrite startups or get in on the ground floor with the opening of so many new resorts and hotels. US companies want to sell Cuba farm machinery, communications systems, and much else. And the United States wants to buy Cuban products, from its famous cigars to products produced by its sophisticated biomedical industry. Many, as can be seen by the scores who have attended the country’s annual International Film Festival or its somewhat less periodic Biennale, are lured by Cuba’s art.

Although the December 17th gesture augers big shifts, it will take an act of Congress to overturn the economic blockade: probably the biggest obstacle to Cuba being able to negotiate on an even playing field with other countries. The Cubans themselves want to preserve their hard won accomplishments. As Raul Castro has said: “We must go slowly, very slowly . . . but not too slowly.”

Cuba has long had rich traditions in literature, poetry, theater, photography, film, dance, music, and the visual arts. One thinks of Alicia Alonso, the great prima ballerina who stayed on after the revolution came to power and developed a world renown school of classical ballet; of writers such as José Martí, Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén, or Nancy Morejón; painters such as Víctor Manuel, Wilfredo Lam, Antonia Eiríz, René Portocarero, or

Amelia Peláez; films such as “Memories of Underdevelopment” or “Strawberry and Chocolate”; singer/songwriters such as Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés, Sara González and others of the *Nueva Trova*; photographers such as Korda, Raul Corales, or Grandal; to name just a few.

From the beginning, the Cuban revolution has paid attention to improving its people’s cultural level. Early on, Fidel warned against dumbing down artistic expression for the masses and urged raising people’s intellectual level so they could appreciate the best in the arts. The 1961 literacy campaign sent 100,000 adolescents out to every corner of the island; after one year they had reduced the national illiteracy rate from 76% to 3.7%. The country became one of the most literate in Latin America. Publishing, filmmaking, and other artistic endeavors are subsidized by the State, and most cultural events are free. Casa de las Américas, the institution responsible for piercing the cultural blockade, has a vibrant 56-year history of worldwide artistic exchange, a publishing program and several magazines, exhibition halls, an important annual literary contest, and more. Not a week goes by without it hosting at least one lecture, panel discussion, art opening or poetry reading.

Ediciones Vigía (Vigía Publishers) is part of this overall cultural history, and at the same time an exception to it. Its unique history is courageous and illuminating.

In a society in which almost every endeavor is managed by the State, Vigía came on the scene in 1985 in the city of Matanzas just to the east of Havana. A small group of local writers and artists felt the need to create invitations and handbills for readings and other cultural events; and they set about to produce them in an original way. Gradually small books were added to Vigía’s repertoire. To date there are more than 500 titles. Over the years, with vision and dignity, Vigía wooed the revolution; its founders were products of that sweeping social change even as they resisted its sometimes coercive power. I first heard about Vigía from friends, and from several films that have been made about the venture.² Then, in 2014, on a research trip to Cuba I took a day off and went to pay a personal visit. More like a pilgrimage.

Vigía celebrated its first 30 years with a festival held April 26-30, 2015. My partner, book artist Barbara Byers, and I were invited to attend: she to exhibit an example of her book art and I to present a bilingual edition of my long poem, *La Llorona*, which would be launched along with several other new titles. The festival’s multiplicity of events provides insight into one of the Cuban revolution’s most unusual and exciting projects.



Cabinets hold books produced in every one of Vigía's 30 years.

In a socialist revolution there is a great deal of centralization, and the variety of Cuban publishers have been State-run since 1959. Although there has always been an amazing degree of diversity, and more often than not progressive forces have managed to win out over narrower visions, publishing decisions were often made by people who favored what State organisms felt was most important at any given time. This could leave the more iconoclastic poets and experimental artists out in the cold. Tragically repressive periods, such as the so-called *Quinquenio Gris* (Five Gray Years) of the early 1970s, ignored or punished artists who were gay, who publicly opposed “revolutionary values,” or were otherwise outside the mainstream and therefore relegated to the margins.³

It was in this context that Vigía opened its doors in 1985. Matanzas City has traditionally been rich in a variety of cultural manifestations. Theater designer Rolando Estévez and writer Alfredo Zaldívar created the impetus behind the project. Both have since moved on: Estévez now produces small editions and one-of-a-kind artist books under his own imprint, *El Fortín*. Zaldívar heads another local publishing venture called *Ediciones Matanzas*, but remains active with the Vigía collective.



A one of a kind book displayed at “My Book, My Home,” one of the festival’s two book exhibitions. This one honors deceased Cuban poet Rogelio Nogueras, and was designed by Elizabeth Valero.

Vigía’s current director is Agustina Ponce. Laura Ruiz has been a part of the publishing house for 27 years; she might be considered its senior editor. And there are some three dozen others, among them editors, designers, those who do the manual cutting and pasting, and interns—including contingents that come regularly from foreign universities for weeks of work study experience.

Everything at Vigía is done by hand, and with throwaway or inexpensive materials. From the beginning the idea has been to create beauty from that which is readily available in a world of hardship and extreme scarcity. Although rooted in this general inaccessibility of materials, the philosophy more importantly reflects a desire to demonstrate that beauty can be made from what is at hand, what anyone can obtain. In this way Vigía makes common cause with ordinary Cuban citizens. Expensive papers and inks may be used in commodity-oriented societies. In Cuba, where resourcefulness and ingenuity have become national characteristics, exquisite design may take the place of broad consumerism.



*At its formal launch, designer Elizabeth Valero talks about my book, La Llorona.
Editor Laura Ruiz looks on.*



La Llorona's outer envelope.



La Llorona's cover.



Signing copies of my book, after the presentation.

Over its first two decades, Vigía produced an extraordinary number of books but remained known mostly in Matanzas, and to a lesser extent throughout Cuba. It was in the 1990s, at the Guadalajara Book Fair, that its presence in the Cuban booth made it visible beyond the country's borders. Today Vigía's books are in important private collections throughout the world, as well as at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and other museums and libraries.

The publisher's growth and immense success was based on several premises. It published, and continues to publish, the best Cuban and foreign literature: poetry, prose, song lyrics, literature for children, and a yearly magazine. Great writers, some of them shunned during the revolution's unfortunate repressive periods, have enjoyed beautiful editions of their work. Among the press's many authors are Emily Dickinson, Jorge Luis Borges, Gastón Barquero, Federico García Lorca, Dulce María Loynaz, Nancy Morejón, Ruth Behar, Natalia Bolívar, Fina García Marruz, and Eliseo Diego. Each book is conceived of and designed taking the writer's personality as well as the nature of the work into account.



Vigía's director, Agustina Ponce, with a clay oil lamp, symbol of the project.



On the festival's opening night, dancers Marcelino Rivas Santana and Richael Rosales Rivero perform "Homenaje" in tribute to Vigía.

Each Vigía book is limited to a numbered edition of 200 copies. The very first rudimentary "press" was an ancient mimeograph machine. As the stencils wore thin, a volume's final copies were almost illegible. Today books are fabricated using a scanner, hand lettering, leaves, sand, the bark of trees, seashells, stones, beads, bells, cutouts, feathers and fabric, as well as all sorts of cast off or inexpensive paper. Local merchants bring offerings of used packing boxes; these often provide the basis for book covers.

Over the years a community has grown up around the project; the people of Matanzas donate all sorts of things they think might be useful, and occasionally the collective puts out a call for something it needs. When it does, the response is immediate and enthusiastic. Agustina speaks of a book design that called for its cover to be wrapped in wine colored cloth. People began bringing wine colored tablecloths, shirts, and dresses they were willing to contribute. Old sheets were dyed the required hue. Dozens of supporters made the edition possible, although each cover displayed a slightly different shade of wine red.

Every five years Vigía has celebrated with a festival. This year's was lavish, and included two book art exhibitions, a fabric art show, a modern dance performance, a local folksinger, a contest for the best book of historical research, and a dozen presentations of new books. Unfortunately, a theater group got rained out. Opening night saw a mock "trashion show," in which the models' outfits were all made from trash. The new books included volumes of poetry, short story, and ethnographic essay; several were bilingual. One large volume was a collection of stories by Latin Americans of Arabic and Jewish origin.



Cuban literary scholar Zaida Capote holds up a copy of one of Vigía's yearly magazines.

Along with Barbara and me, Damaris Puñales, who is from Matanzas but teaches at Case Western University in Cleveland; Rose Mary Salum, a Lebanese Mexican who lives in Houston; and Linda Howe from Wake Forest University in North Carolina were festival guests from outside Cuba. Damaris brings contingents of students down to work at Vigía in a study abroad program. Linda has been influential in making Vigía known throughout the

United States, from New York to San Francisco. Wherever she mounts a Vigía exhibition, she sponsors groups of students making their own handmade books. Rose Mary runs Literal Publishing, a bilingual Texas-based literary magazine and book project dedicated to breaking down the barriers between the literatures of the Americas.



Rose Mary Salum, holding her anthology of Arabic and Jewish stories, and Jorge Fornet, editor of Casa de las Américas magazine, who presented the book.



Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui, leading scholar of Afro-Cuban culture, presenting a book titled Lydia Cabrera en su laguna sagrada.

Vigía is one of those magical places that projects its own aura of compassion, respect for diversity, creativity, and cutting edge art. It not only attracts the best artists throughout Cuba and abroad, it reaches out to community people as well—from the elderly to the very

young—and encourages them to express their artistic inclinations. During this festival many outstanding writers were honored in one way or another. So were a dozen or so retirees, who return periodically to Vigía on a voluntary basis; they say they can't stay away. Young editors and designers are being trained to take over. The community is broad and deep.

We noticed an elderly man sleeping on Vigía's front porch. In the United States we would have identified him as someone without a home. Homelessness has pretty much disappeared with the Cuban revolution, so I was curious as to why he was there. I was told he has mental problems and refuses to take refuge in one of Matanzas shelters. He prefers Vigía's portal. The Vigía collective makes sure he eats, and Agustina heats water for him to bathe, washes his clothes, and otherwise cares for him. Just one more example of what community means to these makers of books and sustainers of dreams.



In one of the workspaces of Vigía, putting the finishing touches on a book.



Mi libro, mi casa (My Book, My Home), the exhibition of one of a kind art books.



Barbara Byers opens the one of a kind art book exhibition. Local poet Israel Domínguez translates her words.



Street near Vigía. The quote on the side of the building is from José Martí. It reads: "The more artistic a craft, the richer the craftsperson." The building is the headquarters of the province's artisans association.

Upon our arrival at the beautiful old colonial house that serves as Vigía's home, I was eager to see my book, in the making for several months. Editor Laura Ruiz had sent me images of the cover and its outer envelope. But I had yet to see the interior or hold the finished book in my hands. As I entered the magical space, Elizabeth Valero met me, book in hand. Twenty-five years old, she was *La Llorona's* designer. She's been with the collective for two years, and this was her tenth book design. I could tell she was nervous as she awaited my response to her creative vision.

I took the book, carefully removed it from its envelope, and began turning its pages. I became emotional as I realized this young woman, a world away in culture and life experience, had perfectly captured the spirit and meaning of my poem. She had done extensive research, not only into the *La Llorona* legend but also into the Mexico that produced it. Then she'd given full reign to her own talent, accessing ideas for the cover and

some of the interior art in dreams. As I came to the book's final page, Elizabeth relaxed. She could tell I was thrilled.

In Cuba's difficult, often messy, transition from isolated Socialist State to a society that of necessity invites market considerations into the mix, Vigía is an example of diversity and openness that sets a powerful example, a space where the spirit of revolution, at its most exemplary, resides. It helps that from its inception the project has been dedicated to an inclusive creativity. The revolution's recognition of past errors with regard to certain repressive periods, as well as the importance it has always given to cultural expression, allows a project like Vigía to flourish. Thirty years after its initial tentative steps, the independent publisher retains the power of its original premise while making the revolution proud.

Notes:

1 Loss of support from the Soviet Union and other eastern bloc countries plunged Cuba into a period of severe hardship. 1991 to 1993 were the most difficult years, dubbed a "Special Period in Peacetime" by the Cuban leadership. People tightened their belts, worked to diversify the economy, and survive. Although all areas of life suffered, the revolution continued to subsidize art and culture. As literary critic Ambrosio Fornet has written: "We suffered reductions in the numbers of books published, a reduction in quantity but never in the importance given to the arts, never in quality."

2 "Ediciones Vigía: Poéticas visuals / Visual Poetics," "La Habana expuesta, un diseño de Estévez / Havana on Display, a Design by Estévez," and "Un libro único de Estévez / A One-of-a-Kind Book by Estévez" are three excellent documentaries by Juanamaría Cordones-Cook.

3 A narrow-minded leadership in the cultural sector promoted at least five years of painful ostracism, in which a number of important talents were unable to publish or perform. Many left the country. Some committed suicide. In the 1990s there was a public exploration of this sad page of Cuban cultural history. Artists and writers analyzed how the repressive period had developed and been allowed to exist for so long. Lectures and forums went deep. Safeguards were put in place so that such repression would not happen again.