

Photographer's Forum[®]

Vol. 17, No. 2 \$3.95

Magazine for the Emerging Professional



Feature Article: Douglas Kirkland

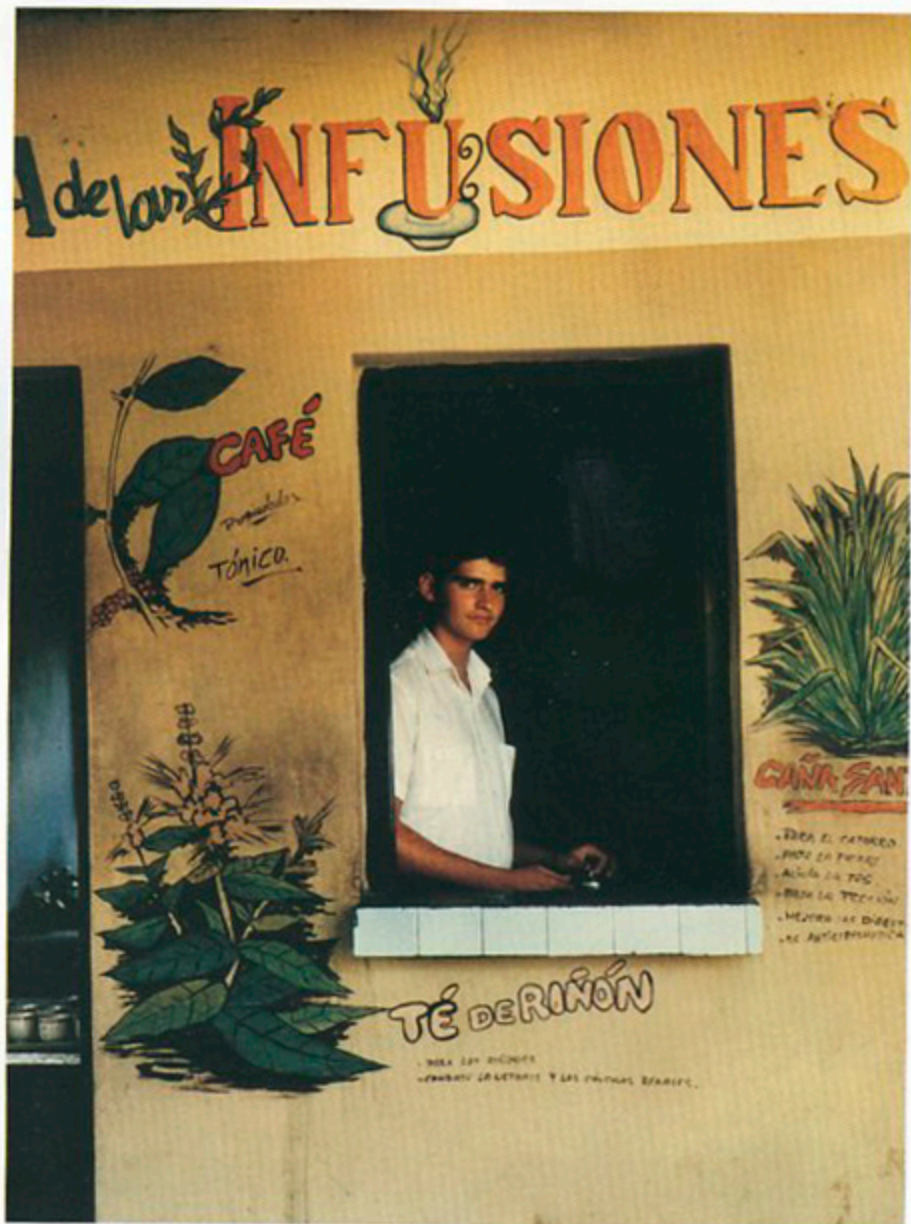
Tria Giovan

by Judith Bell

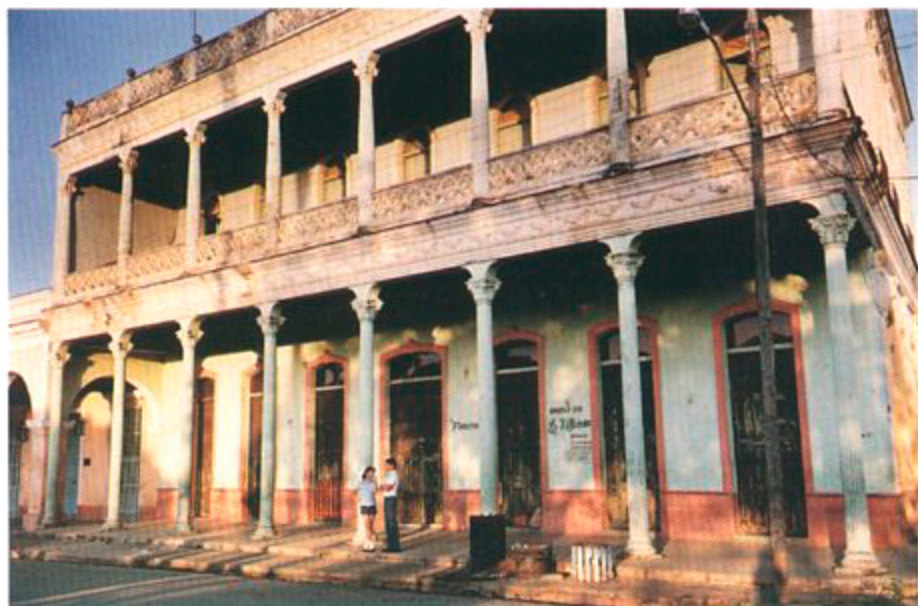
Tria Giovan has always had a fascination with decay, with places uneasily poised somewhere between existence and oblivion. From 1987 to 1989, she photographed the synagogues, tenements, factories, and schools on New York's transitional Lower East Side. "Walking by these great old buildings I kept wondering what was inside. The work was about inaccessibility and the mystery of not knowing what was behind those great old facades." Once inside, Giovan recorded the abandoned, the renovated, and the neglected, revealing the abstract and very poignant beauty found, for example, in the ruin reflected in the cracked restroom mirror of a deserted school.

In 1989 Giovan began work on a project that would take her to Cuba seven times over the next five years. Given the political climate and government restrictions of the last thirty years, Cuba has long since been assigned to the recesses of memory and imagination, becoming a chimera of proportions that far exceed those of this 43,000 square-mile island a scant ninety miles off the coast of Florida. Determined once again to "get inside," Giovan created an intimate record of a country reduced to a series of familiar political and newsworthy scenes.

Undeniably, the news from Cuba is anything but good. Five years since the collapse of the Soviet bloc began cutting the subsidized trade on which Cubans lived for three decades, and more than two years since the United States economic embargo against Cuba was tightened, a black market and elaborate



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systems of barter keep some fed while others go hungry. Electricity in most areas is available for only a few hours a day. Last summer, on the beaches around Havana and along the city's Malecon, the promenade that runs along the sea, crowds gathered to watch the contraptions that daily took to the seas and debated staying or going. Away from the capital, the temptation to leave seemed more distant. In small provincial towns, buses are crowded and infrequent; for the rare car, usually pre-revolutionary American vintage, there is little if no available gasoline.

Avoiding the obviously newsworthy, Giovan has instead recorded in a straightforward natural manner the dignity, pride and resourcefulness of a people and a country in what could only be called the most difficult of times, but what gracefully remains, as Giovan says, "Cuba on its own visual terms."

Raised in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, where her family has lived since 1964, Giovan began photographing in 1978, completing a B.A. in Fine Art Photography in 1983 from Hampshire College. A freelance photographer in New York City since 1984, her work has appeared in the American Photography Annual, Arts and Antiques, The New York Times Magazine, and Vogue, among others. Her work is included in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, The New York Public Library, and the Museum of Modern Art. A Look at Cuba, a book of 100 images is planned.

JB: You first went to Cuba in 1990. What were the circumstances around that trip? Did you go to shoot?

TG: I definitely went to shoot. I went on a three-week trip through the Center for Cuban Studies. I was always interested in going to Cuba, it was part of the unexplored terrain concept. My first day there I was shooting non-stop. I shot so much film I freaked out, realizing I didn't bring enough film, and had to go buy more.

JB: What were you shooting?

TG: Everything. The architecture, the landscape, the people. It's a very accessible place to photograph the way it's physically set up. The city of Havana is very open. You walk into a doorway, an alleyway, and you're practically

in someone's house. The people were also open. They would let you walk into their houses and take pictures. I was basically responding to the environment. It was less about specific things than it was about light, color, and mood. The palette is very familiar to me, growing up as I did in the Caribbean, except that it had more layers to it than I was accustomed to.

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JB: What do you mean by layers?

TG: The history, the culture. It's a country, not just a little island. It was everything I was familiar with on some levels and so much more. It clicked with me. The air, the colors made it familiar, and then it wasn't, because it's a totally different culture and society.

JB: Did you go out by yourself?

TG: Sometimes. Other times I was with another photographer. I also traveled with Cuban friends.

JB: When did you know this was going to turn into a major body of work for you?

TG: I was bitten by the bug after the second trip in July of the following year. It felt like the time to do a series on Cuba, a now-or-never kind of prospect. It's inevitable that things are changing so quickly. I felt a sense of urgency to keep going back, and quickly. The second trip I was there for a month. The other five trips were also a month long. Sooner or later the embargo, the laws were going to change.

JB: Were there problems with permissions for traveling to Cuba?

TG: You are allowed to go if you fall into several of the categories, as a journalist, as a professional doing research. It's broad but it's

also specific. This is all part of the trade embargo.

JB: But Americans are managing to go there as tourists?

TG: Yes. Americans can go there through a third country, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Mexico, Canada, and get a flight in from there. It's not illegal to go to Cuba, it's illegal to spend money in Cuba. People from Europe, Canada, and Mexico vacation there.

JB: How did you feel your response to what you were seeing changed as you became more familiar with the country?

TG: Two things happened. I became more familiar with what was there, but also things were changing very dramatically. It's hard to know if I was just understanding more about how things worked in a Communist society, meeting different types of people, or if in fact they were changing. The first couple of trips really felt like things were a lot easier for people there, a lighter mood was prevalent. Things have become increasingly difficult for people since then, and subsequently the mood is different.

The standard of living was getting lower without the support of the Soviet Union. The first year or two after the collapse of the Soviet Union there was some residual trade going on. Come 1992, especially 1993, things really changed fairly dramatically. Shortages became more profound and transportation more difficult, with the lack of gasoline and oil. I'm not sure how much all this has to do with pictures. That's the stuff everyone already knows about Cuba. Even though you can't totally separate it, I really didn't want to be focusing on the stuff everyone was hearing about all the time, all the negative aspects.

JB: You weren't there to document the decline?

TG: Well no, I was there to document it, but not in a negative way. I was more concerned with the people that were there living their lives. Maybe there was less food but they were still surviving and still had families, a home with pictures on the walls. I tried to stay away from getting caught up in the newsworthy. Not that I wasn't

sensitive to what was happening, because I was. Some of the pictures do obviously show the decline and the decay, but that was never my intention to document a crumbling society and the problems of the people. It was more about the dignity and the pride and the resourcefulness, the stamina they had within this situation.

JB: *Did you focus each trip on a particular city or area of the country?*

TG: No, initially it was really about whatever came up, and exploring. After a certain point, I was trying to cover everywhere. There were very few places on the island I didn't go and it's a big island. I went to all the major cities, the more important towns, and a lot of tiny villages. It's traveling. You meet people, they take you somewhere. You're friends with them and the next time you come back and you spend New Year's Eve with them and their families in this little tiny town out in the middle of nowhere. I really feel like I have family there now.

JB: *So it continued to open itself more to you.*

TG: Yes, definitely.

JB: *You were working exclusively in medium format. Why?*

TG: Shooting medium format gave me the hefty negative to work with. Many times I worked in low light situations. I worked without a tripod to have a loose and spontaneous quality to the work. Shooting print film gave me a much bigger latitude.

JB: *You do your own printing?*

TG: Yes, I've been printing since 1980. My training is more fine art, and even though it's color it's about the craft. I would drive a printer absolutely crazy.

JB: *What were some of the challenges printing the material?*

TG: It was a lot of work. I'd come back with 200 rolls and there were the contact sheets, work prints, and then going from there up to the bigger prints.

JB: *What are some of the things you find you have greater control with, going into the lab yourself?*

TG: The color balances and being so specific. Doing it myself I can afford to be infinitely meticulous about it. It's a lot less expensive

of course, and I can really get down to one point of magenta or yellow, or whatever, and be a real fussy printer. Especially when it's for exhibition you have to be that way. I don't want anyone doing it. There is also something about doing the printing yourself that forces you to edit. You look at an

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image and think, "Do I really want to spend the time to make this big huge print?" In printing I have to spend time with the image. If it holds up for me then I know there's something there. If I'm bored with it by the time I'm ready to make it into a big print, I might as well forget it.

JB: *Were there particular qualities you were trying to bring out in this work that you were able to emphasize when you were in the darkroom printing?*

TG: I don't know if that relates to the darkroom. There were things doing it the way I did it that made it easier for me. I didn't want to change the overall feeling of the project by bringing a tripod along for long exposures. It just didn't feel right. It makes me too claustrophobic in that situation. Working with print film and handling the printing myself I was able to go in the darkroom and pull a print even if it was an underexposed negative.

JB: *Interiors figure heavily in this work?*

TG: Yes. I've been shooting interiors commercially since 1987 and I

became interested in interiors as a result of my freelance work. It would never have been something I would think about doing artistically had I not had this commercial influence. There aren't a lot of people who do that so much. It's something that's always interested me, exploring and getting into places that are behind closed doors, the mysterious exploration.

JB: *How did your Lower East Side work come about?*

TG: I was working as an assistant to Adam Bartos doing interiors, and I was getting work from architects as a way to build up my portfolio. Living on the Lower East Side, I was walking around all the time exploring, and I kept finding all these great old buildings and wondering what was inside. I started shooting old synagogues and old public buildings, all the while pushing to get inside. I was determined to gain access. Sometimes the son of a rabbi happened along, or someone affiliated with public schools who could get me in.

JB: *Why inside?*

TG: It was about inaccessibility and people not knowing what was there, myself included. Once I got inside there was this fascination I've always had with decay, of recording places in a certain state that won't be around much longer. It was also about history and architecture. That's also what was very appealing about Cuba.

JB: *Did your eye change in any particular way when you began commercially shooting interiors that made you more aware, made you see buildings you hadn't seen before?*

TG: Yes, but it probably influenced me more on a technical level, a craft level. Learning how to shoot interiors and what's involved in doing that kind of work, I then came to the fine art work with more skill. The visual concentration you need to do interiors, the way you approach a room, that carried over to the fine arts. It gave me a different perspective when I would go into a space and think about how I was going to approach it, and it helped determine what I

was going to do there. It's a problem solving thing for work: Here's the space, what do I need to do, to say with this space, what needs to come across in the photography for the specific purpose of this job? When I went in to do my own work I found a lot of that carried over, the concentration and focus.

JB: *What's the defining element about your work?*

TG: I try to make things as simple and natural as possible. Especially in terms of light, even if it's not natural, I try to make it look as natural as possible. I sometimes mix strobe, or manipulate tungsten to look like daylight. I'm not a total tech head. That's the way my fine art work is, too. It's really straight.

JB: *How did you get inside these interiors in Cuba?*

TG: Basically I just walked in. I'd ask to take a picture and they'd invite me in. I don't think my presence is particularly threatening. I try to be as laid-back and sensitive to the situation as possible. If I was a big guy, I don't know. I do think people perceive women as less threatening. Maybe in some ways that worked to my advantage. Cubans are very open people, it's their nature. They're very warm.

JB: *So there was no sense of them being guarded?*

TG: Not really. It's probably changing because of an increase in tourists, and things getting more difficult.

JB: *Walking into someone's personal space, did you find people just went about their business and you were able to shoot and not have it be stilted or feel contrived? Or did they become too conscious of you?*

TG: Interestingly, I found that they're not so self-conscious, in some ways because Cuba has been isolated. They don't react in the predictable way. I'd say, "Excuse me, may I take your picture?" And they'd say, "Sure, why not?" And then they wouldn't change their face. They retained that great expression that first caught my eye. I think in societies where there are a lot of tourists, and people are more

accustomed to being photographed, they have a preconceived idea of the image they want to project. It's very rare that people don't change when you ask to take their picture.

JB: *Did you shoot public buildings as well?*

TG: Not so much interiors of formal public buildings, no. If I did, nothing really came of them. I shot some hotel lobby interiors. The Communist tourism thing is an interesting concept that does manage to present itself visually in weird ways, the 1960s architecture. I went to Russia and there were the same exact hotel rooms, the same plastic light fixtures and cheap plywood beds. It's a definite look.

JB: *What were some of the most interesting interiors you shot?*

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TG: The simplest things, a spotlessly clean house with a thatched roof and cement floor out in the middle of nowhere. We'd drive up, walk around, and they invited us in. The opposite extreme was the Havana mansion of the poet Dulce Maria Loynaz that ended up as a feature in *Art & Antiques*. The house was elaborate, elegant, and totally falling apart. No one's opened the windows in twenty-five years. That was a total find. I was looking at the gate thinking what a neat house it was. After the dogs barked for fifteen minutes, the chief historian of Havana, whom I knew and who lived right next door, came out. He arranged for me to come back and meet Dulce

Maria. I was predisposed to photographing the kind of life that was lived there. There is not much of it, and it's hard to find.

JB: *Were there any kind of restrictions on you as a photographer?*

TG: Obviously you can't do military installations, like their Ministry of Interior, Cuba's CIA. They really don't like you taking pictures by that building. Otherwise, no. Once we were in this teeny town and word got out quickly that we were there. Two official guys came and found us—we'd been there about a half hour—and asked us what we were doing. We told them we were visiting. They very sternly told us we shouldn't be photographing without permission and that when we were done we should leave. You could encounter that. I was just fortunate.

JB: *Out of a trip how many prints did you average?*

TG: Some trips were really more successful than others, I really couldn't say. As the project stands now, it's about 100 images over seven trips. The middle trips were the most productive for some reason. The last trips started to feel like I was done. I wasn't finding myself quickly prolific.

JB: *Towards the end did you feel like you were going back to fill specific gaps in the material?*

TG: Probably a little of that, too. I might have intellectualized things too much, thinking the project needs this kind of image or that kind of image. It might have been a little confining. The last time I was there was last January. Things are really tough for people and it's hard to see. It doesn't have the same feeling it had the first few trips.

JB: *There has to be a lot of sadness.*

TG: Yes, it's sad, it's depressing and difficult to see. I went there with no preconceived ideas, I had no particular political agenda, I wasn't going with the intent of making a story that was going to be interesting, I went with an open mind. I really wasn't interested in portraying Cuba in any particular way. What happened, happened, and that's what the pictures are about. ●