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MAGAZINE FOR THE EMERGING PROFESSIONAL



THE CUBA ARCHIVE: TRIA GIOVAN  
IN-DEPTH PROFILE OF KEITH CARTER  
STAN RAUCHER'S FLEETING MOMENTS  
PORTFOLIOS

Spring 2018

\$4.95



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# Tria Giovan

## THE CUBA ARCHIVE

JUDITH TURNER-YAMAMOTO

In *Walker Evans: A Biography*, by Belinda Rathbone (Mariner Books, 2000), the photographer expresses the compulsion to document life. “It’s as though there’s a wonderful secret in a certain place and I can capture it.... Only I, at this moment, can capture it, and only this moment and only me.”

Everything is about timing.

The best documentarians, caught up in a singular experience in a defining moment, find themselves compelled to shoot by instinct. For Tria Giovan, that moment came in 1990 when she first traveled to Cuba and discovered “a country teetering on some indefinable

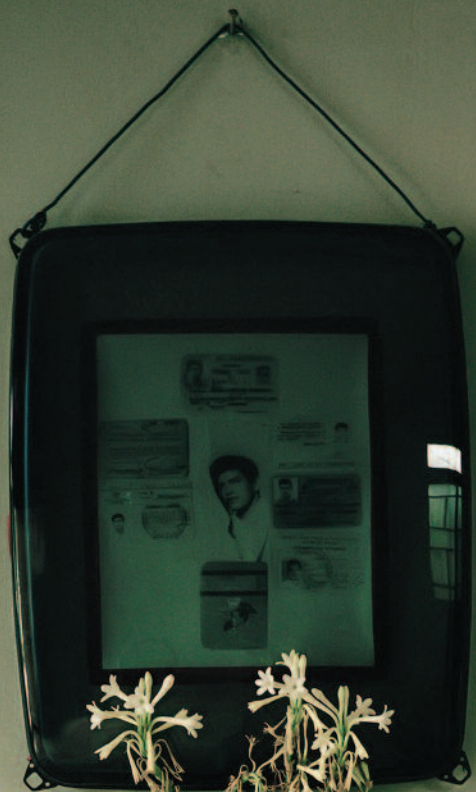
precipice.” There on a two-week trip arranged through the Center for Cuban Studies, a New York-based organization that first began leading journeys to Cuba in 1973, Giovan discovered a place of unexpected physical and social accessibility. “You could literally walk into someone’s home and feel totally welcomed,” she recalls. “I would ask someone if I could photograph them, and they’d say, ‘yes,’ and literally not change a thing. My first day in Havana, I shot one quarter of the film I’d brought with



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*Opposite: Memorial Gonzalez. Ciego de Avila, 1992*

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*Guitar Gun. Las Tunas, Cuba, 1993*

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me. There was something familiar yet somehow profound, a vibrancy and sophistication that was unexpected. I knew this was poised to change and I would have to go back.”

Giovan did go back, again and again. Over the next six years, she took 12 monthlong trips, making over 25,000 images. Her work culminated in the collection *Cuba: The Elusive Island/La Isla Ilusiva* (Abrams, 1996).

More than 20 years later, Giovan has returned to the thousands of photographs she took of 1990s Cuba to once again compile a book, *Tria Giovan: The Cuba Archive* (Damiani, 2017). The photographic series is also showcased in *Cuba Is*, an exhibition on view through March 4, 2018 at the Annenberg Space for Photography in Los Angeles. The photographs offer historical documentation of a specific moment in the island nation’s history — “a period that no longer exists,” says Giovan. Her considered portrait of the country and its people documents Cuba’s *período especial* (“Special Period”), a time of austerity, as Soviet subsidies diminished and foreign investments had not begun.







*Dancing. Isabela de Sagna, Cuba, 1993*

*Opposite: More Records. Havana, Cuba, 1993*

A fascination with decay, with places uneasily poised somewhere between existence and oblivion, has always motivated Giovan. From 1987 to 1989, the New York City-based photographer captured the synagogues, tenements, factories and schools on the city'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."

It was this pull to parts unknown that first drew Giovan to Cuba. A Virgin Islands native, she was looking for a place in the Caribbean that had not been inundated with the development and homogenization she'd witnessed firsthand growing up. Intrigued by a *National Geographic* article on Old Havana architecture, she took that fateful first trip. "Cold air seeps through the leaking seals of the no-longer-pressurized cabin windows of the ancient Cuban airplane," she writes in *The Cuba Archive*. "En route from Havana to Santiago de Cuba, I am fascinated and curious about everything I see below. Lone Ceiba trees dot the open cane fields,

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with an image, you'd better like it  
and it better have staying power."**

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a sugar factory belches a black plume. White-sand beaches and mangrove swamps trace coastlines and archipelagos. Empty highways thread through a crazy quilt of towns, villages and farms.... If I die now — not entirely out of the question considering the condition of the plane — I will be okay with it, for this is the adventure of a lifetime."

Giovan's penchant for in-depth, timely and thoughtful subject exploration served her well in Cuba. At Hampshire College, she studied photography with Jerome Liebling — someone who was very much about subject immersion, with his five-decade focus on Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx — and Elaine Mayes, a documentarian who urged her students to focus on the work, not its potential art world reception.

Whether photographing in Cuba on the street, or inside urban and rural homes, capturing people or signage and storefronts, or recording shortages and propaganda, Giovan's spare compositions are devoid of artifice. She reveals her subject with a singular directness and precision. No one is reduced to a type; rather, each subject's distinct bearing and individuality come through.

On this self-assigned mission, Giovan found her life defined by "being in Cuba, earning money to go to Cuba or planning my next trip to Cuba. Every five months, I was there for a month. I learned the language, I read Cuban history and literature, I collected music on the streets of Havana, I immersed myself in the politics." This educated awareness and the intimacies of her travels helped her define her subject and to describe it with such simplicity and certainty that the result seems an unchallengeable fact untainted by opinion.

"I spent countless hours exploring Havana," says Giovan. "My goal was to view every major city and town. Baracoa was like stepping back in time. I cooked with coffee-collective farmers, I bathed in waterfalls, I celebrated major holidays with my extended Cuban family. I gave people rides — people who had waited on the side of the road for endless hours, because there were no buses, there was no fuel. It was a difficult and often disturbing time for the average Cuban. The people amazed me with their unerring good humor, generosity and hospitality."

Giovan recalls the long but rewarding analog process that followed each of her trips. "I would return with 200 rolls of film. I'd go to the lab, cut and sleeve images. Then I was in the darkroom to make contact prints, and then back again to make 8x10 prints and again to make the exhibition prints. If you're going to spend that much time with an image, you'd better like it and it better have staying power."

*Cuba: The Elusive Island/La Isla Ilusiva* was her first book about Cuba, and Giovan found herself playing a balancing act while editing the resultant 103 pictures. "There were tensions between the exile community in Miami and the Cuban community, and between the Cuban and American governments. How do you not alienate an entire population in a politically charged time?" She found herself editing images in broad strokes. The accompanying texts were chosen from existing materials from the writings of some of Cuba's most important writers, including Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Heberto Padilla. "Honestly, there was no one person I could have chosen who would not have alienated someone."

Several images from the photographic series were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. The Art in Embassies Program (AIEP) exhibited the work. Now a recognized Cuba expert, Giovan began a period of magazine assignments for major publications like *ESPN* and *GQ* that took her back to Cuba. "Already the country was changing. I began to see hotels, the tourist numbers building. Cuba was now in full world catch-up mode, even though Castro never declared an end to *el período especial*, and we were growing apart."

For her next long-term immersive project, Giovan focused closer to home on a three-mile stretch of beach on the eastern end of Long Island. *Sand Sea Sky: The Beaches of Sagaponack*, featuring 63 selected images from the ten-year/10,000-image project, was published by Damiani in 2012.

A few years later and home during a snowstorm, she found herself contemplating the many boxes housing her Cuba work. Armed with a loupe and a lightbox, she fell into a color negative rabbit hole. "Surely, I thought, the beautiful young girl was 30 now, the hipster couple had moved off the island, people had passed on, the buildings had fallen down, the billboards disappeared."

But even more arresting was something else, a subtlety that she had bypassed as insignificant in her 1990s edit. "I don't know if it was the passage of time, the evolving number of transformative historical events, my own maturity as an artist, but all of this, as well as a kind of nostalgia, coalesced to inform my new take on the work. I realized that in these many boxes, I was staring at a literal historic archive."

The 6x9 color negatives, nearing 25 years in age, were deteriorating much like the old Cuban buildings some of them documented. In urgency, Giovan and an intern began what would become a two-year project. They scanned 1,000 images, did a second edit of 450, a third of 200. "We worked with an Imacon scanner, creating

***Opposite: Bus Stop March. Havana, Cuba, 1992***





© TRIA GIOVAN

*Helado. Havana, Cuba, 1994*

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450 MB scans. It was simply astounding how much information was in the negatives that was never seen looking at them in analog fashion with a loupe and lightbox. When I blew them up on my computer, I could see the numbers on the phone, the details on a pair of espadrilles. The work needed a home. And making a home meant making another book.”

Giovan returned to Cuba for a week in 2017, sponsored by the Annenberg Space for Photography on assignment to photograph Cuban artists and performers for *Cuba Is*. She was struck by the plentifulness of everything — the food in the neighborhood farmers’ markets, the cranes building new hotels, the new tourist-friendly messaging that had replaced the revolution-enforcing billboards. “It’s a different place,” she says. “I mean that in a good way. They deserve it.” ▲

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