

Cuba Through the Windshield

Photos by Alex Harris

If you look at my photographs of Cuba — what are they really? They are looking at the symbols of Cuba that most Americans have in their minds, the archetypes of Cuba: the American car, the beautiful woman, the revolutionary hero. I approach each of these archetypes as a photographer asking a question: If this is our sense of Cuba, if Americans see Cuba through this lens, what does that really mean?

And the cars that are in Cuba today, the predominant cars, are the American cars from the 1950s and early 1960s. So I thought to myself, what if I could see Cuba, literally through that lens? I used the car as a way of looking at the landscape of Havana, not because I knew what the pictures would say, but because I wanted to see what they would say if in every image you had an American car and a landscape of Havana. What would they say in relation to one another?

“Sol and Cuba, Old Havana” [on the back cover] is an example of the way in which these car pictures work and speak to us that’s really subtle; it’s almost subconscious. You look at an image like this and your eye imagines the way you’d see it in reality. What you would see in focus is either the landscape in the background or the dashboard in the foreground. With my camera, I am seeing them together. I am seeing them absolutely in focus together. So there’s a kind of a hyperrealism there. And then there’s a kind of a surrealism there because you see outside the window: there is blur; there is motion. And I think at first these pictures make you think, “Okay, this is reality.” And then in another second you look, and you think, “This is something a little bit surreal and strange.” So these photographs ask you to look at them and then to look at them again.

In fact, this is the same window through which we in the United States still look at Cuba — the window of the 1950s and 1960s. So really, these cars are a kind of metaphor for our ongoing relationship, and they ask us to think about that relationship and what it means that as nations we are still stuck in this place.

Adapted from the transcript of a video interview with Alex Harris on The Iris, the blog of the J. Paul Getty Museum. The video “Alex Harris, Virginia Beahan and Alexey Titarenko on Photographing Cuba” was filmed in the galleries of the exhibition “A Revolutionary Project: Cuba from Walker Evans to Now” at the J. Paul Getty Museum, The Getty Center, Los Angeles.

Photos from The Idea of Cuba by Alex Harris. Reprinted with the permission of the University of New Mexico Press.

The beach at Miramar, looking north from Rudy Hermandó Ramos’s 1957 Chevrolet, Havana, May 20, 1998.
Photo by Alex Harris.



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Sol and Cuba, Old Havana, looking north from Alberto Rojas's 1951 Plymouth, Havana, May 23, 1998.

Photo by Alex Harris.