

THE FORMOSA EXCHANGE

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* 2021 Taiwan Literature Award

* 2021 Openbook Award

One morning in May, the citizens of Taiwan wake up to find they have all switched places with the citizens of Cuba. Huang Chong Kai's astonishing work of magical realism opens new conversations on race, marginality, and the (re)telling of history.

On the 20th of May, 2024, one day after the inauguration of Taiwan's first Indigenous President, the entire population of the island wakes up to discover they have suddenly switched places with the residents of Cuba. Two multi-ethnic island communities with both colonial and Indigenous histories suddenly find themselves facing baffling new questions, as well as the greedy stare of a new "mainland" hegemon.

Huang Chong Kai's astonishing work of magical realism opens new conversations on race, marginality, and the (re)telling of history by weaving multiple voices and genres into a single work. We experience the miraculous switch through the eyes of Taiwan's first Indigenous President, a Cuban painter, a Han Taiwanese who wants to be Indigenous, and a former inmate of Guantanamo Bay. The author transforms these stories into a narrative ecosystem by presenting them through a variety of different media styles, including book reviews, podcast transcripts, and interviews.

With its multitude of voices and narrative formats, *The Formosa Exchange* isn't just a story, it's an event – think Gabriel Garcia Marquez told with the historical commitment of Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. It also offers extremely trenchant commentary on social constructions of race, multiculturalism, and political marginality.



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Huang Chong Kai is a Taiwanese novelist. His works include *The Broken*, *Blue Fiction*, *The Contents of the Times*, and *Further Than Pluto* (French and Japanese rights sold). He also worked as a book and magazine editor.

THE FORMOSA EXCHANGE

By Huang Chong Kai

Translated by Mary King Bradley

Flashback

May 20, 2024, Havana

Duvier del Dago Fernández had been invited to a one-month residency in Taiwan. Before his departure date, he opened the email from the ChengLong Wetlands International Environmental Art Fair, looked at the Points to Note (air temperature and humidity looked to be about the same as Havana), and checked the flight connection information (layovers in Mexico City and Vancouver before arriving in Taipei). No matter how he figured it, it was going to take him twenty to thirty hours to get there. Duvier stared at the photos attached to the email, at a broad expanse of water stained gold by the setting sun, at the water plants, telephone poles, and low houses that dotted the pictures. The light-and-dark contours of the landscape reminded him of the small fishing village where he grew up. His friend – the only person he knows in Taiwan – had written to say he was looking forward to seeing him. They hadn't seen each other for eleven years. Occasionally Duvier went abroad for a residency program or an exhibition. Only then did he have the opportunity to log onto Facebook to catch up on recent developments and read messages. Even though it was much more convenient to go online now, it was still too expensive. The money saved on internet fees went to his daughter, who had just started university.

Eleven years ago, Duvier had received a Rockefeller Foundation grant, which had taken him to the Vermont Studio Center, not far from the Canadian border, for the entire month of October. Afterward, he went to New York and Miami to meet up with various friends and family, curators and gallery agents, and arranged the dates for his solo gallery show the following year. While at VSC, Duvier became friendly with other artists from Asia, Africa, and South America. They often shared a table at mealtimes in the dining hall, chatting in their stiff, labored English. Sometimes he would also drop by neighboring studios to see how things were going with other people's work. Roughly fifty people were in his VSC cohort, mostly visual and installation artists, as well as about a dozen artists. Most of the artists were young; maybe only a handful were thirty-six or -seven like him. He discovered that almost all of the artists were in one MA program or another at a US university, or had otherwise just finished one and were now looking for subsidized residencies in various parts of the US and Europe. Before VSC, he had received invitations from and attended residencies at art institutions in France and Spain. Typically, he had to submit a finished work at the end.

One day when they were sitting at the same lunch table, the Taiwanese writer asked if he could visit Duvier's studio. Duvier said sure, and was surprised when the writer thanked him in

Spanish. After lunch, Duvier went for a walk in the area, crossing first the bridge on the VSC campus and then the intersection to get to the other side of Main Street. On either side of this street were an art supply store, a pizzeria, bookstore, coffee shop, sports bar, newly opened supermarket, hair salon, and laundromat. All the basic needs of life on one street. Not many people were out and about, so naturally there were no lines. Passing these shops, he turned onto Railroad Street and walked past an auto repair shop, a funeral home, and a public library as he neared the river. Maple and apple trees were everywhere along the roadside, the apple trees' rotting windfalls, crushed and whole, littering the ground and attracting flies. The iridescent flies that hovered in the sweet, cloying odor of apple pulp seemed slightly wrong to him. That such ugliness, on view everywhere at home, would exist at this high latitude had never occurred to him. At that time of year, the weather was comfortable and dry, and Duvier planned to walk to the river and then slowly make his way back to the studio. In that high latitude's cool temperatures, everything was like the landscape spread out in front of him, giant color-blocks of blue, of green, of brown and yellow that didn't fade or mottle with time. His footsteps crunched the fallen leaves that covered the path into tiny pieces, shattering them, every snap of the dead leaves audible in the quiet.

A few days after Duvier's arrival, a VSC staff member drove the artists to a big box store twenty minutes away to purchase art supplies and tools. Duvier bought several rolls of nylon thread in different colors and thicknesses, boxes of metal hooks, large sheets of red, dark blue, purple, and dark green cellophane, and some blacklights. Back in his studio again, he sketched out some ideas and deliberated, trying to decide which of them to make. The building had eight or nine studios in it. Except for the common space on the first floor, which was filled with a variety of cutting tools, spray guns, table saws, and welding equipment, each artist had a blank slate to work with. Within the space of their four white walls and single worktable, they produced a smattering of color and line applied in different media, their ideas projected from the mind onto physical objects. Oliver, the Cameroonian artist in the studio next to Duvier's, had collected a huge basket of pinecones from all around the campus, his plan being to create an installation exhibit in his studio and in open spaces outdoors. He assembled the pinecones into troupes of foraging mice that encountered different situations along their various routes. In the studio across from him, the Japanese artist Ms. Yamamoto had dyed lengths of fabric by hand, cut the cloth in varying shades of red into massive squares, and collaged these pieces along the ceiling and corners of the studio walls, like overflowing pus. Duvier took a sip of coffee. He was doodling in his sketchbook – a series of women's faces and a man's muscled torso – when there was a knock on the door. It was the Taiwanese writer.

Duvier took him around the studio, showing him the framework of wooden boards he had set up, trying in halting English to explain his preparations. He paged through several sketches and then turned on his laptop to show him work from a previous exhibition. The writer's face expressed his admiration, and he came right out and said that Duvier was a genius. A bit embarrassed, Duvier tried to explain the principles of how he went about making art. Their English seemed to suffer from a polio-like paralysis as it stumbled from side to side, the sense of their words crawling toward each other in spasmodic jerks before veering away again. He didn't

know if the Taiwanese writer understood him, so he switched on the black light to demonstrate how the process worked. In the dark room, the once purple nylon thread glowed a uniform fluorescent green. As the light passed through the various colors of cellophane to shine on the thread of a different material and color, it appeared to be an altogether different hue, as if a piece of wavelength had been selected from the spectrum and affixed to the line.

Painting had always been the one thing Duvier enjoyed. By lucky chance, he won several art competitions, which gave him the opportunity to leave his small village in central Cuba, near Santa Clara, and head west to the National Art Schools. Later, he tried working with mixed media. Then, during a power outage one night, he discovered by accident that a scavenged pile of damaged nets and fishing line changed color in the weak beam of his flashlight. The light penetrated the various colors of cellophane packaging and separated into different tones as if passing through a filter. A luminous “wireframe” lit up inside his mind, and he produced his first object: a simple, anime-style 3D camera. Over a period of countless nights, the power had gone out without warning in that area of Havana. No one knew when power would be available, so matches, candles, and flashlights had to be kept on hand. But that night, surrounded by the pitch-black of his top-floor studio, in heat and humidity devoid of any breeze, the beam from his flashlight had passed through red cellophane, and a camera’s florescent-blue outline resembling 3D computer graphics had floated in the endlessly extending dark. It was truly laughable. In this city with no electricity, freely accessible internet, or drawing software, he had woven a neon camera like a fisherman would have, 100% by hand. His girlfriend was right. Just living in Havana could turn anyone into an inventor.

René, his teacher at the National Art Schools, had once taken several students to Pedro Pablo Oliva’s painting studio, where Duvier saw the masterpiece *El Gran Apagón* with his own eyes. His teacher joked that this was their Cuban blackout version of *Guernica*, and this gentleman their Picasso of the Frequent Power Outage. As he finished speaking, the overhead lights flickered and went out. It was as if they had plunged into the belly of some enormous beast and the darkness crushed peals of laughter out of them. A tiny flame lit a candle; its light spread from one candle to another. Oliva handed a candlestick to René, commenting that this was perfect timing since he had only an hour or two of power a day, and so painted by candlelight. Duvier raised his candle and leaned toward the canvas to examine the brushstrokes close up, thinking about how Oliva was painting this picture while he was still fooling around at the Art Academy in Trinidad. His teacher called out not to get too close. Setting a national treasure on fire would cause a lot of trouble. His classmate Alessandro said the painting was a masterpiece. Who would have thought it possible to portray everyday power outages in an epic style worthy of depictions of war? The first thing Duvier noticed about the painting was its green tint. It resembled the endlessly rotating montage of a half-waking dream, distorted faces crowded at the painting’s center like stones of different sizes; it resembled a flowing river, the top of a faintly glowing wolf’s head attempting to breach the water’s surface. He recalled the period that had followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, thought of every room in Santa Clara, Trinidad, and Havana where he had lived. Most of the time, like his circle of friends, he had relied on food rations to live. Every meal was some

unidentifiable pastry made of soy flour and mashed potato, a small portion of vegetables, the occasional rare egg, and a cup of sugar water. (Sugar was the one product Cuba had no appreciable lack of.) People often stood unmoving in the road, and sometimes the sudden, dull thud of someone who had fainted and fallen to the ground could be heard. The sound reminded people how long it had been since they last heard the heavy thwack of meat being slapped onto a butcher's block. During those years, no matter where a person went, it was like walking through a collective dreamland, everyone's dreams woven into and rubbing up against each other, people like ships passing in the night, confused about when to wake from the dream, wandering in endless circles. It was as if Oliva had captured on canvas the whole city, the whole country, which now gently swayed beneath turquoise-colored water on the painting's flat surface, which depicted an endless array of distorted objects falling somewhere between food and desire. Curved lines of liquid spilled from coffee cups, breasts with other breasts that blended into the canvas, beards with faces, snails, umbrellas, bicycle wheel rims, multitudes of floating, bloodshot eyeballs. It was as if all these symbols of starvation and idleness had been thrown hand over fist into this abandoned river.

He was reminded of that Alejo Carpentier short story, "Journey Back to the Source", which everyone had read. Who could have imagined that the country's fate was long since written down and sealed into those ten-something pages of story? Cubans simply repeated the process of demolition and construction in an endless loop: "The tiles had already been taken down, and now covered the dead flower beds with their mosaic of baked clay. Overhead, blocks of masonry were being loosened with picks and sent rolling down wooden gutters in an avalanche of lime and plaster. And through the crenellations that were one by one indenting the walls, were appearing – denuded of their privacy – oval or square ceilings, cornices, garlands, astragals, and paper hanging from the walls like old skins being sloughed by a snake."¹ It was as if the painting had ripped open that same kind of window, allowing them to look directly at the reality under the surface. Or was it also a refuge? After all, the artist had made two other large-scale paintings in this *Place of Refuge* series, both of which had depicted the early years of the Special Period. There was, for example, the extreme imbalance of light and dark used in the composition of *El Gran Refugio*. Even in broad daylight, the viewer seemed to be looking at it close up by candlelight, as if the painting were saying their lives were a constant power outage (although shitting and sex went on as usual). As for the first painting in the series, *El Rey en su Refugio*, it seemed to be a metaphor for the uncertain political situation of the Special Period, when the giant hand of the United States could reach in at any time and do as it liked. In this painting, the people were taking refuge underground while a head wearing a crown looked sideways at a big beard, its eyes closed. All the people had closed their eyes too, their expressions drowsy, as if sunk into a trance. In all three paintings, passageways extended from both left and right into the real world. Three formalin-soaked dreams. Three surreal tumors in relief.

¹ English translation from the Spanish by Frances Partridge, in *The War of Time*, 1970.

His teacher René said that after Oliva finished these three paintings, he had the eyesight of a slave weaver, and told the students to look at the two pairs of glasses the painter now had to wear all the time, one for looking at things far away and the other for looking at things close up. This was the price of art. The candle's dripping wax scorched Duvier's fingers. His teacher often took students on field trips to find inspiration in busy streets and run-down communities. His own studio was an open-access art space. Even those who didn't make art wanted to swing by and stay for a while, as if in doing so they could be infected with inspiration and immediately produce a poem of epic proportions. The students often formed friendships in the El Romerillo neighborhood not far from the National Art Schools, chatting with the people who lived in shacks made of discarded boxes, broken boards, or rotting wood, the students' state of mind one-half social worker and one-half artist engaged in their creative projects as they learned to produce work after work out of the cleaned up and mended garbage gleaned from refuse piles. Thinking about it now, he had been unable to distinguish the boundary between the campus and the surrounding community back when he had first arrived at the school. The buildings that became the National Art Schools had been born from a whim of the Revolution's leaders: they had decided to transform the broad green swaths of a country club, symbol of capitalism, into the most magnificent landscape in the world, a dream come true that could rival the most intense victory of the Revolution. Three architects participated in the planning, presenting their designs within two months. The plan of the five schools looked like the womb, breasts, and labyrinthine body of an organic life form, ready to nurture generations of new artistic blood. But then came the US embargo and economic sanctions, the scarcity of construction materials, the project's repeated construction halts, and finally its total shutdown in 1965. (The day it was shut down for good happened to be significant – July 26, the anniversary of the Revolution.) When Duvier entered the Art Institute thirty years after construction ended, he felt as if he had walked into the ruins of paradise, or into buildings left by some ancient civilization, it being unclear whether these had never been finished or had fallen apart over the course of many years. (A classmate told him that the abandoned School of Ballet really had been used in a contemporary TV series as the setting for an alien civilization's monastery.) He had long been accustomed to the fact that, in Cuba, every single item and piece of equipment had existed for a long, long time, so long that you might think this world didn't contain a single thing that was new. Just like the Olive-Green Brothers,² who would probably never die. New was a luxury. New was a fantasy. New was a long time ago. New was a long way into the future. New had nothing to do with that moment. The only things that shone in Cuba were the dazzling hot sun and the waves that surrounded its islands. Even the Coppelia ice cream that required a two-hour wait in line tasted of the tourists who licked it long ago.

After Cuba's glorious age of magnificence was over, what remained was the mediocrity of daily life stretching into infinity. That was how he felt as he passed through the campus corridors day after day. The incredible arcs of the horizon sometimes resembled birds, sometimes palm leaves. Towering overhead, the tent-like Catalan vaults, their endless assemblages of brown terra

² This refers to the Castro brothers, whose olive-green military uniforms became synonymous with them.

cotta tiles, red bricks, and white mortar that resembled an almost inflated hot air balloon about to take off. A winding, serpentine walkway. An intricately intertwined maze of passages. The entire campus was a huge, permanent installation exhibit, the unfinished space open to a variety of possibilities for the very reason that it could not be closed off. Weeds that trailed over everything, moss resembling ink, the temporary residents of the abandoned buildings, the building materials dismantled and reused elsewhere: it had all merged, grown into an ecosystem that echoed the organic architecture of the schools' buildings. As he walked beneath the unbroken length of the School of Ballet's roof vaults, there were often flooded depressions or trickles of water. He sometimes couldn't help but think the controlled, precisely dotted brush strokes in the oil paintings of his teacher René were not in fact a product of Seurat's pointillism or Lichtenstein's comic strip halftone dots, but because a pixel-like technique that depicted Cubans divided into smaller units or separated into a variety of winding passages, drawers, and rooms was the natural outcome of having lived such a long time in this forsaken organic architecture.

And so, Duvier had simply moved from one crude matchbox in Havana across land and sea to another matchbox, assigned to him by VSC. His artwork was installed on matchstick-scaffolding that was burned up to become a blank slate again; his resume was written in smeared ash. During the years he made artwork with his teacher, he had felt no different from the scavengers. Finding stuff and putting it to use had always been a Cuban virtue. But in Havana, there were two million masters of invention, maintenance, and recycling picking through the supply of stuff. What could be done with the things that even they didn't want? He had thought about it for a long time. Whenever he socialized with classmates in his teacher's studio, he knew without looking inside the refrigerator that there was nothing to eat in it. The power cord lay beside it like a hibernating snake. They all smoked the tobacco rations only some of them received, took turns drinking from a bottle of chispaetren, azuquín, carambuco, mafuco, or some other rotgut wine with an uninteresting name, invented by unknown person's poverty had crowned with wisdom. They made fun of each other's protruding but empty bellies and shared the rumors that someone had beriberi, someone had multiple neurological symptoms, someone had fallen from their bicycle as if struck by a sudden, personal power failure. But everyone was still alive – alive to have sex, alive to fantasize about a day when they could squander money on huge supplies of paint, smoke lots of marijuana, drink lots of alcohol, eat lots of meat. The only way to get such stuff was to paint, to draw these desires on paper, or to use the scrap materials at hand, cutting and pasting them. They satisfied their metaphysical desires with fabrications, and then looked for potential opportunities where they might swap these for the real thing. Duvier's 3D graphic camera was followed by tanks, whales, men and women walking or reclining. Before graduation, he participated in the Havana Biennial, then afterwards became his teacher's colleague when he stayed on to teach. Following in his teacher's footsteps, he began to organize exhibitions, sell his work, and participate in foreign art residencies every few years. Each time he stayed somewhere for a while he was like a fisherman, fishing up his floating, glow-in-the-dark 3D models one by one from the sea's void. All experience he gained was truly helpful as he traded one girlfriend for

the next, formed and quit partnerships, obtained his own studio, a Sony Cyber-shot digital camera, a 13-inch MacBook Pro, an iPad, an iPhone, and a daughter.

To prepare for his first solo exhibition, Duvier gathered old photos, past publications, and videos that showed his personal growth and development. He then spliced these into several recordings to be played in a loop beside the 3D exhibits woven from nylon thread. Large plaster replicas of cow, sheep, and human skulls were paired with American comic strip-style portraits and placed along the path of traffic flow. He wanted to produce an effect similar to a flashback while simultaneously creating an assortment of constantly changing anatomical and psychological imagery. The year he was born was the same year Cuban Airlines Flight 455 exploded. It was also the year that Cuba's socialist republic adopted its constitution by referendum. The 80s had been relatively uneventful as he ran around like a monkey at school and in vacant lots, kicking a soccer ball. He had listened to Soviet-made record players or radios, while the cars he saw on the road were no longer the extravagant American Dodges and Plymouths, but Soviet models such as Lada and Volga that emphasized practicality. He wore Cuban-produced jeans, ate black beans and rice, and drank tuKola. He was oblivious to the impending collapse of a faraway wall, the ghost of scarcity that would afterwards open its maw to devour the crocodile island that was Cuba. Duvier entered the Art Academy in Trinidad at the age of fifteen, around the same time that the Cuban pitcher René Arocha defected to Miami. That's how it had always been while he was growing up. There were people who left, and those wanted to but could not. No one ever knew for sure if those who had said they wanted to leave made it to that other shore. Everyone had grown used to leaving without any goodbyes. But that was the first time an athlete had intentionally used an overseas competition to skip the country. It seemed like a bad omen. When Arocha made the starting line-up for the St. Louis Cardinals in the major leagues, it proved to be an inspiration for all the baseball players who never had enough to eat: you can be like me. Over the years, someone was always leaving the country on a ramshackle boat made of lashed together tires and plastic oil drums, trying to get to the promised land across the strait. As long as they made it onto shore, they could start a new life. It was a national sport, and genuine athletes had taken to the sea, one after another.

Looking back, Duvier had only a vague, hazy recollection of those years during the so-called Special Period. Possibly the whole country had been like an old man suffering from diabetes ever since, swaying on its feet, groggy. They had free, high-quality medical care, but no medicine. They could stay alive like this. Time had softened to resemble melting ice cream, sticky sweet, become sugar water that dripped too fast for the tongue to lick. Everyone looked on helplessly as the sugar water flowed between their fingers, unable to get a grip on anything, just the one hand sweaty and sweet. So, when he ate a fried cake made of soy flour and corn meal mush in the VSC dining hall, his desire to gag was reflex, and the only way to get rid of his nausea was to switch to a bowl of lettuce salad doused in Caesar salad dressing. He tried to tell the Taiwanese writer sitting at his table that he'd had his fill of that kind of food in the 90s. His lifetime quota for anything made from soybean flour had been used up. He thought it was a bit like being far from home and running into an old lover he hadn't been in touch with for many years, the loathing he

felt at the time they broke up suddenly remembered after an initially friendly greeting. He was pleased he had gotten through it. The Taiwanese writer started to talk about the Cuban major league baseball players Yasiel Puig, José Fernández, and Yoenis Céspedes, although Duvier had in fact never heard of them. He was unsure for a minute if *baseball* was what they called *pelota* in Cuba. He knew that some of his friends would arrange a place to meet in secret, plug in a Japanese-made satellite dish, and watch major league games, but he had never participated. He was amazed by what his Taiwanese friend knew about these players. In the lounge, he watched the Los Angeles Dodgers playoff game against the St. Louis Cardinals. Compared to his memories of baseball games he had been to in person or watched as broadcasts, the stadium, the turf, the players, the helmets, the bats – everything on the TV screen was clean and bright, as if the games in his memory were dull, grainy copies. In the end, the Dodgers lost. His Taiwanese friend said it was strange how the Dodgers had such a great pitcher but always lost in the playoffs. In a rush of enthusiasm, he got his laptop to show Duvier several of the players' highlight reels from various games, explaining that this young pitcher named José was only twenty years old and had a very good chance of becoming *the* big name in pitching in the next ten years. Rumor had it that before José was fifteen years old, he had tried to get to the United States by raft three times and all three times had been sent to jail. The fourth time, he made it. Duvier's Taiwanese friend joked that this pitcher had the same last name, so he and Duvier were probably related. Duvier said it was possible, he would have to ask his dad – although it had been fifteen years since he'd last seen him. (Actually, the Taiwanese friend didn't know that people's full names in Latin America included both their father's and mother's surnames, and he was too lazy to explain.) They both laughed. He asked his Taiwanese friend why he liked watching baseball, and he replied that they had something in Taiwan called "American Time", which meant you had so much time that you could waste as much of it as you liked. Baseball was the embodiment of this American Time, slow-paced with no timer ticking down. A game took three or four hours, and players and fans spent most of that time waiting – waiting for a pitch, a swing, a high fly, or a home run that was over in a few seconds. "Now I know why we Cubans are so good at baseball," replied Duvier.

During that month at VSC, Duvier's Taiwanese friend often came looking for him, wanting to hang out, to go buy things at the supermarket, or to get out of the studio and play ping pong. Neither of them knew how to play. They just held a beer in one hand while they put on an act of holding the paddles and hitting the ball back and forth. The time they spent picking the ball up was far greater than the amount of time the ball moved back and forth on the table. From time to time, the friend from Taiwan would ask Duvier about Latin American literature. What about Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes Macías, Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges? Duvier hadn't actually read many of them. (Yes, this is another joke: Cubans have a very high literacy rate, but there aren't so many books to read.) So, when his friend asked him to recommend some Cuban novels, he suggested the *Trilogía sucia de La Habana*, by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, and told him those were the books to read if he wanted to learn about Havana and the real lives of Cubans. Rachel, another Cuban artist sitting at their table, grinned and heartily agreed with Duvier's suggestion. Turning toward the Taiwanese writer, she said it was all Sex, Sex, Sex.

There were plenty of others, of course, but he ought to find the *Dirty Havana* trilogy interesting. Rachel and Duvier exchanged glances, smirking like co-conspirators playing a prank.

Speaking of Rachel. Duvier had heard some friends mention her work at the Havana Biennial the previous year. Possibly her good looks drew people's attention more than her work. He knew she had been the cover model for the American photographer Michael Dweck's photo book *Havana Libre*, and that a painting of hers had been photographed and included in the book. He also knew that the photography collection was an attempt to capture a dynamic portrait of creatives and the children of government elites. Quite a few of his friends had been invited to step in front of the camera's lens, including the sons of Fidel and Che, and an exhibition of the photographs at a Havana art gallery the year before had made Dweck the first American to exhibit artwork in Cuba since the United States embargo began fifty years ago. Rumor had it that Fidel's son had said jokingly to Dweck, "Thank you for making me famous." He also knew that Rachel, a full fourteen years younger than he was and roughly the same age as his students, was a graduate of the highly venerated San Alejandro Art Academy of Fine Arts located near the National Art Schools where he taught. Wherever Rachel went, she created a stir. A few of the young artists at VSC asked him about her, trying to pump him for information. He felt for these young men. They should think about it, how a young Cuban girl could be here at VSC. This was not something these students who had no need to worry about their American universities' stock of brushes and paints, who were comfortably engaged in their creative process and smoked marijuana all day, had any hope of understanding. You are only here to paint, Duvier thought, but we must put our lives at risk to touch a paintbrush. For this reason, he sometimes felt that whether the cage was real or imagined, it required a firm resolve even to think about breaching its boundaries. Many of his students would like to follow in the footsteps of the artists who came before them, who had left and become famous in the United States or Europe. It might be, however, that the key was not artistic talent, but the willpower to endure tests of personal mettle. Rachel undoubtedly had that perseverance and strength. Otherwise, she would not have gone to Barcelona and could not have been there, at VSC. His teacher René was right: so long as you thought of yourself as an artist, even if you seemed to have nothing, you had everything.

He liked the concept for Rachel's Biennial work: a giant, double-sided mirror approximately a hundred meters long and two hundred centimeters high, erected on the Malecón seawall to reflect the embankment, sea, and sky, as well as the people and vehicles that passed by it. Simple, powerful, and impressive. Resembling a painting by René Magritte inserted into a real-world landscape, the mirror's edge was an invisible picture frame that seemed to almost but not quite blend into its surroundings. The bright sky and shaded clouds were painted on the mirror's surface according to the different angles of light refracted from the sun and glistening waves, turning it into a moving picture that could be revised and added to at any time. It could be viewed for only an instant. In each of those instants, a different version appeared. Visiting tourists and fascinated children enjoyed looking at their reflections in the huge mirror and would cut capers like animals in a vivarium. The installation exhibit created an interactive experience, the mirror doubling the crowd as well as making their performances in front of the mirror doubly ridiculous.

He couldn't help but be reminded of a friend quoting Borges: "Mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they multiply the number of men." While he was abroad, he would check out what his Cuban art colleagues were up to, get a better understanding of where other people's work was being shown and what kind of response it was receiving. Doing this in Havana was somewhat difficult. There was no convenient way to use the internet, and he didn't want to waste money on the intranet to post on Red Social, the Cuban version of Facebook.

Duvier decided that his culminating work submitted for this visit to VSC would be a human skull and head facing each other, and the model of a large house. The pair of heads would be set up in his studio, while the large house would be constructed out of a vine-covered pavilion frame tied with guyline atop one of the large wooden picnic tables outside. Mark the positions of all the nails and knots on the sketch first, and it would take only a few days to do the actual weaving. While constructing the model of the large house outside, he unwound several spools of line and poured out the key hooks. The daytime temperature was gradually dropping. Wearing a hooded jacket, Duvier turned on his laptop, connected to the center's wireless network, and streamed an online series that featured interviews with artists and musicians (his own included) filmed by the Havana Club. He listened while he worked, and from time to time hummed along. During the Open Studio held on the last day of the residency, everyone at VSC visited the 50-plus workspaces and exhibit locations to look at what others had accomplished over the course of that month. In the small, two-story building that housed the writers there was nothing much to see. It had simply provided a bit of quiet in which to write. Duvier looked at two or three of the rooms, all furnished with the same, unvarying set of a desk with office chair and a single upholstered armchair, and then headed for the other exhibition spaces. He saw the Kenyon painter's fine-brush watercolors of military parades, several still life oil paintings and self-portraits by the African American painter, and the densely arranged Arabic numerals in the Indian artist's studio that crawled across an entire wall, the white worktable and canvas like an army of ants, each number rendered in pencil, by hand. Rachel had hung dozens of square mirrors and pieces of glass on several maple trees out on the lawn, continuing her attempt to use mirror images as an artistic medium in her installation work. This single day of the cohort's exhibitions had been a month in the making. For him, what mattered most in creating art was time. More precisely, it was the short duration of the work's existence. The thread, lights, and fluorescent 3D lines he used were not inherently time-resistant materials, like steel, bronze, and stone. What he sought was the opposite of that, a sense of uncertainty or even haphazardness, never anything more than a line drawing created with nylon thread. These virtual objects could seemingly never be filled in with flesh to become real objects. The next day, he took down the thread, pried up the hooks, rewound the spools, and cleared everything away.

In the years that followed, he had attended residencies in Miami, Paris, Mexico City, and then Beirut, holding exhibitions and networking in more places, selling more of his work, and feeling as though the world had expanded just a bit more. But Havana was still Havana, like a bottle of premium aged rum, its sealed-in flavors unlike those of any other city. After every complicated and exhausting return flight to the José Martí International Airport, he was greeted

by the familiar temperature and humidity, the Spanish spoken by the customs officers during the inefficient entry process spoken in the incredibly familiar and dear accents of home. No matter how fast-paced the world outside, there was only the one slow and easy tempo to follow when he returned to Havana. As he left Terminal 1 and rode the slow-going bus into the city, his mood gradually evened out, preparing him for the return to daily routine. Duvier was a little surprised by the enthusiasm of his Taiwanese friend, who often took the initiative to be in touch. Whenever he went abroad and posted on Facebook, he always found a few unread messages from Taiwan. Sometimes he would randomly browse the internet for information about Taiwan: In the 15th century, it was a paradise roamed by pirates, and like Cuba, was an island country located on the Tropic of Cancer. Over 14,500 kilometers apart, both places had been colonized by Spain. Taiwan's population was roughly twice Cuba's, but Cuba covered almost three times the territory of Taiwan. The relationship between Taiwan and China seemed to be very complicated, reminiscent of Cuba and the United States. He remembered that his Taiwanese friend had joked that both their countries probably had the same modest desire: the hope to be treated like a normal country.

As he came and went, Duvier discovered that his daughter was rapidly becoming a young woman. Most of the time, she lived with her mother and grandparents in an apartment located in Old Havana, and he would go spend time with her whenever he could. Cuban girls could look quite mature by age eleven or twelve and begin attracting friendly advances from boys and older men. He hoped to spend more time with his daughter in the next few years, and if the opportunity presented itself, take her abroad to see what there was to see. After all, in a few years, the man she needed would not be her father. Over those several years of the Obama administration, US relations with Cuba also were gradually improving. The Cuban Five were finally released and returned to Cuba, after which the governments of the two countries announced first the normalization of relations, then the restoration of diplomatic relations, followed by the establishment of embassies in their respective countries and the relaxation of restrictions on Cuban Americans sending money to Cuba, among other things. His life in Havana seemed to be changing right along with the political situation. At the age of forty, he got serious about a new relationship. The National Art Schools, which had become the University of Arts of Cuba, invited him to teach again the following year. Then he heard that the Rolling Stones would come to Cuba for a concert, and that Obama was also scheduled for a visit to Havana before he left office.

Along with these changes came a whole series of social and economic reforms. The government laid off a large number of employees and opened up various independent occupations and industries, which meant that the people had to figure out their own solutions to things. Anymore, there were street vendors who sold pastries and roadside stands that weren't just gouging *yuma* tourists,³ but also doing a bit of business with the general public. Those who had the funds and could find a way to clean out a room or two offered bed-and-breakfast guest

³ In Cuba, the term *yuma* is used to refer to foreigners.

accommodations or opened a *paladar*,⁴ and they only accepted convertible pesos (CUC).⁵ State-owned taxis, private taxis, pedicabs, and horse-drawn carriages swarmed the downtown area. He knew that some of his teaching friends and some doctors would pick up some extra cash by transporting passengers in their private vehicles when they didn't have classes or a hospital shift. After all, a salary of 500-some pesos (CUP) a month wasn't enough to support a family. Although it all depended on what you considered necessary to life. During his time in foreign residency programs, life was indeed convenient. The shelves in any shopping center a person cared to try were always fully stocked with countless items. But relatively basic expenses were also high. Whenever he paid for something, he would mentally convert it into Cuban pesos and feel a bit shocked. Besides which, he had to pay for everything overseas, the highest costs being medical care and education. In Cuba, all of that was covered by the government. If he listed all the pros and cons, the two columns might offset each other. Still, wasn't life in Havana a bit easier this way? In the midst of all the changes, it was particularly easy to have complicated feelings about history. Duvier thought of the more than fifty years that his country had been embargoed by the United States, relying on complex international strategies and goods exchanges to keep itself going. In the end, the roadside stalls were filled with pirated DVDs of Hollywood movies. If you wanted to be famous and make big money, you had to get to the United States. He had wandered around the Little Havana district of Miami several times, surrounded by illegal immigrants from Cuba and their children (now more and more of them from Nicaragua and Honduras) who had come to the United States over the past several decades. He had walked to Domino Park with its multiple tables of elderly people playing dominoes, and then moved on to the nearby Calle Ocho Walk of Fame where the names of Cuban celebrities were embedded in the sidewalk. Looking up, he saw a row of Cuban cigar shops, souvenir shops, and restaurants lining the road. When he stood in front of the Bay of Pigs monument in the Cuban Memorial Boulevard Park, this version of historical memory caused a slight feeling of dissonance to well up inside him. In the small and easily missed Bay of Pigs Museum, he looked at the walls covered with photos of the Brigade 2506 NCOs and soldiers who had taken part in the battle as if he were seeing two different versions of Cuba. One was the Little Havana block there in front of him, clean and tidy. None of its buildings looked run down, and even though it was old, there was no worry about replacement materials and parts. The other was the yellowing Havana cityscape with which he was so familiar, which had seen long and hard use and left its edges and corners worn. The two cities were inextricably linked. In Miami, where every Cuban seemed to have relatives, the anti-Castro Cuban exile organization Alpha 66 had ill-wished a never-realized collapse on the island nation for many years. The island country across the strait had always secretly watched the programs on the American-sponsored Martí television station, secretly envied relatives and friends on the other side while they endured the monotony of their daily lives. How should history reckon its accounts?

⁴ Indicates restaurants privately owned by citizens.

⁵ The convertible peso (CUC) was a Cuban currency issued to foreigners, while the Cuban peso (CUP) was used by locals. The use of a dual currency ended in January 2021.

On one side of the equation, you had the boredom of capitalism; on the other, the helplessness of socialism. Havana at that moment seemed to be vacillating between a choice of two difficult paths. All the ordinary people like him could do was go with the flow and find a way to survive.