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ARTSLANT **China**

A Major Survey of Belgian Art Opens... in Cuba?

So you walk into El Floridita, one of many Havana bars that prides itself on being a former haunt of barfly Ernest Hemmingway, and there is **Guillaume Bijl**, the Belgian artist known for absurd installations in which he brings a driving school or travel agency into a museum context. On your way out, you try to hail a taxi, but it is already occupied by **Joëlle Tuerlinckx**. In a nearby eatery, video artist **Johan Grimonprez** is having lunch. It feels like Havana is having a Belgian moment—and in a way, it is.



For the exhibition *The Importance of Being...* in **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes**, Cuban curator Sara Alonso Gómez selected 40 top-notch artists born or living in Belgium, including stars like **Marcel Broodthaers**, **Wim Delvoye**, **Berlinde De Bruyckere** or **Francis Alÿs**, to

showcase Belgian art—with all the complications and identities that term implies—across Latin America. Through July 2016 the show will travel to three other museums in South America: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil.



Steverlynck, Sam. "A Major Survey of Belgian Art Opens... in Cuba?" *ArtSlant China*, December 2015.

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From top: Wim Delvoye,
Guillaume Bijl, Kendall Geers

Some of the artists were busy during their stay in Cuba making new works commissioned for exhibition. I caught up with three artists who made new works in situ for *The Importance of Being...or* were looking ahead toward their contributions for the 2015 Havana Biennial.



Koen van den Broek is making a new painting for every country where the exhibition will take place. Van den Broek is known for his paintings in which he renders generous details of the urban landscape like curb stones in a style between figuration and abstraction. “My work is often on location,” he says, “as the grey and clouded Belgian landscape does not work for me. First I wanted to render the run-down beauty of Havana, but since I was here last time, I noticed they have been restoring a lot. And that was a bit too complex. I found a location in the street opposite Hotel Presidente, one of the oldest high-rise buildings in Havana. In this painting, there is a strong contrast between the architecture and the vegetation. This is only the second time I’ve used this kind of green. It is a green that you see everywhere, and which has a kind of Miami atmosphere.”

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Koen van den Broek

Making the work on the spot was not obvious however. “We are here in a tropical climate with a high humidity. Because of that, the paint took a much longer time to dry. At 2 x 3 meters, it is also a big format. The work could not even enter the apartment where I was supposed to work. Then they proposed a garage, but there was not enough light and too much dust. In the end, after some bureaucracy, I was allowed to make it in the museum, as I had hoped from the beginning.” The artist also took precautions to ensure he had all the material he needed. “We sent over a crate of 300 kilograms with all kinds of paint, even staples and a screw driver. Finding material is not always easy here... The crate will later also travel to Buenos Aires and Rio. It almost becomes like a kind of mini-atelier.”

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Peter de Cupere, who typically works with smell, is one of the three Belgian artists—together with Koen van Mechelen and Michel François—who will be participating in the upcoming Havana Biennial. De Cupere visited Cuba some time ago on prospect and for *The Importance of Being...* he wanted to realize a work that captured the smell of Havana, including the powerful scent of gasoline that the old Chevys and Buicks spit out. “The pollution is strong here,” he says. “Initially I almost got sick from it. I took some samples from the various smells and send it to a special laboratory in Paris. You only have three such laboratories in the world. I asked them to make a perfume from it. But I also added a smell that reminds smoked meat. As a reference to the pollution we inhale with our lungs.” The resulting artwork is created in a kind of cloud, in which the visitor can put his head in order to smell it.

Peter de Cupere with his *Smoke Cloud*, which reproduces the scent of Havana



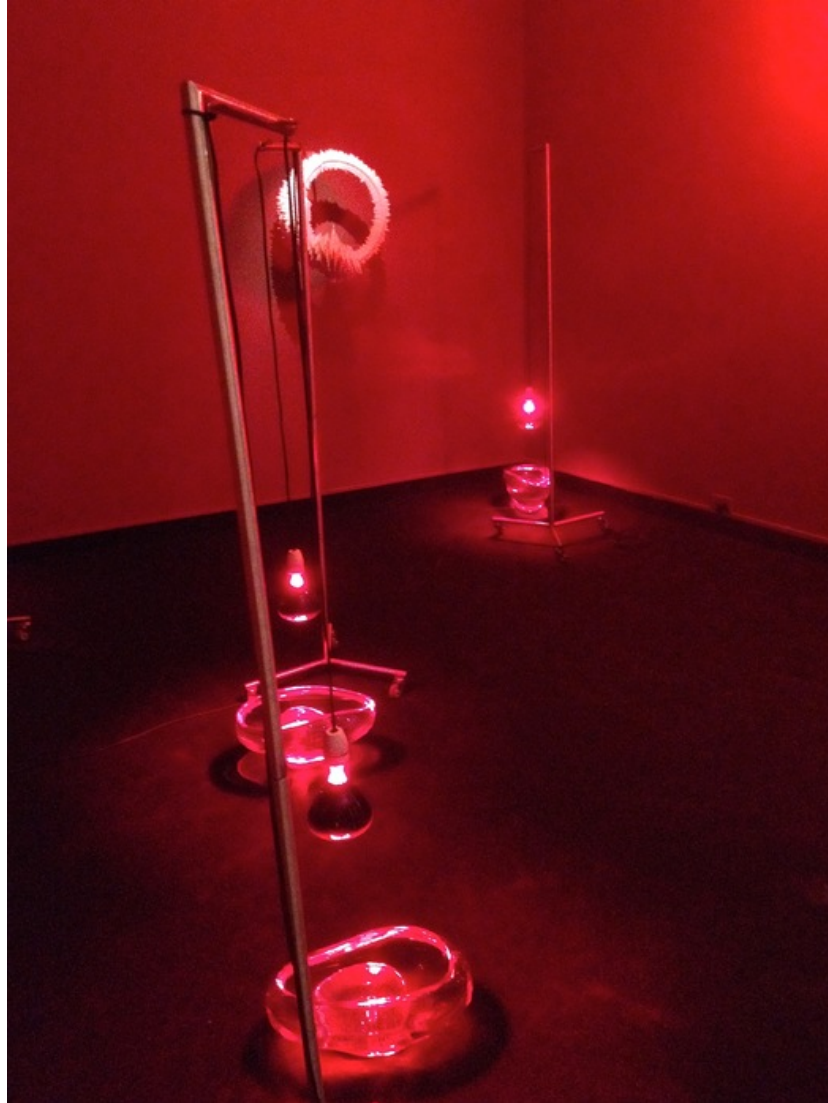
For the Havana Biennial, which opens in late May, he will present *The Smell of a Stranger*. In the Botanical Garden, he will give one plant the smell of another one, by manipulating some of its components.

For over a decade **Koen van Mechelen** has been working on his **Cosmopolitan Chicken Project**, which crossbreeds domestic chickens from around the world to create a truly global specimen. He's presented various steps of his research across the globe, including in the most remote areas in the world, and now the CCP comes to Cuba. For *The Importance of Being...* he shows a 3D rendering of a chromosome of all the cross-breedings. “It is a visual rendering of immunity. It would show more resistance. The image is a chromosome of the *Mechelse koekoek* [a Flemish breed of chicken]. It is a very realistic image, which I call *Evolution of a Hybrid*, combined with a more poetic image. It is a kind of breeding center. It consists of glass bowls with glass eggs that are under water. It is one installation, but consists of a meeting between two universes.”

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Koen van Mechelen

Van Mechelen will also participate in the Havana Biennial. “I was here in 2007 basically looking for the **Cubalaya**, a chicken species from Cuba that I could not find anywhere—until I was invited by a collector in the countryside, one hour from New York. On the fields, I saw a Cubalaya and asked the owner for some of the eggs. The guy has died now. So apparently, I am one of the few people in the world who has all the varieties of the Cubalaya! When I was invited to the Biennial, I immediately decided to bring the Cubalaya back where it belongs, in Cuba! We have sent some of the breed installation and eggs over, which was not easy at all. But we got support from the highest level, so it was possible. We have already bred some of the animals, but will continue to Steverlynck, Sam. “A Major Survey of Belgian Art Opens... in Cuba?” *ArtSlant China*, December 2015.

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do so in Havana. In a library, we will also show all the documentation material of our research, and we are organizing a symposium on fertility, inviting professors from all over the world.”

Looks like Cuba hasn't seen the end of Belgium quite yet. In a perfect metaphor for the complexities of global and national identities, a trace of Belgium—in the form of a native Cuban chicken—will remain in Havana even after the artists have left.

—Sam Steverlynck

The Importance of Being... is on view at Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba until April 26, 2015. It will then travel to Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Buenos Aires, Argentina (July 4–September 12, 2015), Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (December 2, 2015–February 14, 2016) and Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil (April 11–July 14, 2016).

(Image at top: *The Importance of Being...* Installation view with works by Angel Vergara Santiago and Pascale Marthine Tayou)

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