

Inspired by collectors in Florida, a Cuban-born couple have opened a private museum

Bringing a little Miami to San Juan

JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

1st June 2005 00:00 BST

San Juan, Puerto Rico. Diana and Moises Berezdivin, who own a chain of department stores in Puerto Rico, have converted a warehouse in the capital, San Juan, into a museum for their collection of contemporary art. “We saw the collectors in Miami and maybe the idea came from them”, says Mr Berezdivin, referring to his visits to the public collections of Martin Margulies, the Rubells, Rosa de la Cruz, and Craig Robins.

Known as Espacio 1414 (after its address at 1414 Fernandez Juncos) the three-storey building opened in January with an exhibition of work by Latin American artists such as Kcho, Guillermo Kuitca, Gabriel Orozco, Alfredo Jaar, Viktor Muniz, Ana Mendieta, and a rare work by Juan Francisco Elso, among others. The event was a first for the art-deprived “51st State”, as some call the US commonwealth.

“In Puerto Rico, there are not many opportunities to study Latin American art”, notes Ms Berezdivin, so she and her husband established a non-profit foundation, bought the building in 2004, and have now opened it by appointment. It will initially show works from their collection, but may host loan exhibitions in the future.

Their curator is Julieta Gonzalez, who worked at the Museum of Fine Arts in her native Caracas until she was fired, she says, for opposing the Chavez government. “Classification of works is more by styles than by nationality or

medium”, she says, noting that Ms Berezdivin “wants the collection to map the changes at the turn of the century, particularly the insertion of Latin American art into international circles and the breaking down of traditional boundaries”. “It’s an opportunity to teach students, professors, and collectors about Latin American art”, adds Mr Berezdivin, who has made a fortune as owner of Kress Department Stores (now numbering 120 stores) since arriving in Puerto Rico in 1963.

The Cuban-born Jewish couple fled Castro’s regime in 1961 and, after brief stays in Miami and New York, settled in San Juan. The couple may create seminars for students in Puerto Rico who wish to train as curators; at the moment no training of any kind is available.

Ms Berezdivin has been collecting works of art since the late 1970s, beginning with Israeli art, then Latin-American, and for the past five years African, German, British, and American art. Today the collection includes more than 1,000 works, by Wilfredo Lam, Joaquin Torres-Garcia, Roberto Matta, Rufino Tamayo, Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt), Jesús Rafael Soto, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, as well as Cuban art by Jose Bedia, Kcho, Los Carpinteros, and others. They also own works by Basquiat, Ross Bleckner, David Reed, Jonathan Lasker, Louise Lawler, Andres Serrano, among many others.

Ms Berezdivin serves on the board of the private Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, which opened in a converted hospital five years ago and is devoted to Puerto Rican art. She is one of only a handful of active collectors of international contemporary art in Puerto Rico. Another is Michelle Marxuach who for several years invited international artists to create work as part of M&M Proyectos, a non-profit organisation housed in a former Kress store donated for the purpose by the Berezdivins. Since it closed in 2003 the contemporary art offerings have been limited.

The Museo de Arte Contemporaneo shows Puerto Rican and some Latin American art in a restored 1920s school building. The institution was founded by artists in 1984 and today has a collection of 800 works nearly all of which have been donated by the artists.

The commercial gallery scene is modest at best, despite the annual stimulus provided by the investment bank Merrill Lynch which every March sponsors the Puerto Rico Art Week, with educational programmes and free transportation between galleries.

A government-sponsored public art project has launched a contemporary art programme to beautify the public transportation system, but the most important contemporary art event on the island takes place every three years when the San Juan Print Triennial fills various venues around the city. It began as a print fair, but this year, under the direction of Houston MFA curator Mari Carmen Ramirez and a group of curators including José Ignacio Roca from Columbia, and others, was expanded to involve all media.

They gathered more than 250 works by around 100 artists and collectives from 14 countries, mainly Latin America and the Caribbean, but also the US and Canada.

By far the best permanent exhibition on the island is in the Museo de Ponce, which houses the private collection of sugar magnate and former governor Luis Ferre, who opened his home in 1959 and in 1965 moved the collection into a new building by Edward Durrell Stone. There, hidden in the southwest corner of the island, are first-rate Flemish, Dutch, Spanish and French Old Masters as well as a remarkable assortment of pre-Raphaelite works. Director Augustín Arteaga, the Mexican-born founding director of the Constantini Museum in Buenos Aires, says the building will close in 2006 for two years in order to renovate and to add a new wing.

Originally appeared in The Art Newspaper as '*Bringing a little Miami to San Juan*'

 *Appeared in The Art Newspaper Archive, 159 June 2005*

[More Archive](#)

[Topics](#)

[Collectors](#)

[Contemporary art](#)

[Latin American art](#)

[Private Museums](#)

[Private collections](#)