

Cuban brings a disturbing 'behavior art'

S.F. SHOW TREATS ISSUES OF POWER

By Jack Fischer
Mercury News

Not surprisingly for a Cuban-born child of diplomats, artist Tania Bruguera's topic is power.

"When I started studying art, it was a way for me to understand the way things happened in the real world," says the 33-year-old, whose parents managed to raise her in one hot spot after another, from war-ravaged Lebanon to Manuel Noriega's Panama. "Politics are inside of me."

For Bruguera, currently on a four-month stint as an artist-in-residence at the San Francisco Art Institute, the topic embraces not just governmental power but how individuals react to it, and how they wield power with others.

A prime example of her inquiry can be seen at the art institute's Walter and McBean Galleries, presenting the West Coast debut of her video and sound installation "La Isla en Peso" (Island Burden), previously shown at the Venice Biennial. But more on that later.

Bruguera's work shares space in the San Francisco Art Institute galleries with art by Egyptian-born Ghada Amer, who intends her semi-abstract stitched and painted pornographic imagery on canvas to be a personal feminist answer to the macho stance of first-generation abstract expressionism.

Together, the work by Bruguera and Amer reflects an effort by Art Institute President Ella King Torrey and her gallery director of two

"If I talk about Marilyn Monroe in Cuba, it means different things than if I talk about Marilyn Monroe here."

— TANIA BRUGUERA



COURTESY OF TANIA BRUGUERA AND LIEBMANMAGNAH.N.Y.

Modeled on the Cuban flag, Tania Bruguera's "Estadística" (Statistics), is made of hair and fabric on board.

WORKS BY TANIA BRUGUERA AND GHADA AMER

Where: the San Francisco Art Institute's Walter and McBean Galleries, 800 Chestnut St., San Francisco

When: 11 a.m.-6 p.m.
Mondays-Saturdays

Through: March 30

Admission: free

Information: (415) 749-4564.
www.sfai.edu

contemporary art institute.

Trained in performance art, Bruguera says she prefers "behavior art," a form of her own devising that seems to mean something of a hybrid between performance and installation art.

"Island Burden" is a case in point. It consists of a darkened hallway filled with animal sounds, that opens into a darkened room with eight video monitors. On the monitors is Bruguera herself, acting out what for her is a particularly insidious reaction to power:

years, Karen Moss, to raise the profile of the institute's galleries by reaching beyond the faculty and the Bay Area artists who traditionally have shown there.

Bruguera's is the third visit to the institute by Cuban artists in less than a year, as a result of a relationship forged when Cuban-born faculty member Tony Labat led a group of students to the island in 1999. Since then, artist Raúl Cordero of Havana and the three-man art troupe Los Carpinteros have come to the institute for residencies.

Moss said Bruguera is the first Cuban artist in recent history to have received a master's of fine arts degree from a U.S. art school — the School of the Art Institute of Chicago — and is typical of young Cuban artists who have chosen to remain Cuban nationals and to travel to other countries instead of emigrating. Bruguera has established the first department of performance art at her undergraduate alma mater, the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana.

She's also fairly hot just now, having had work included in biennials — that proliferating form of international art exposition that is supposed to take place every two years but seems these days to occur every two minutes — in Venice, Havana, Johannesburg, even Kwangju, South Korea. A recent morning found Bruguera departing her digs at SFAI for Boston, where she was showing yet another installation at a

tion to power: self-censorship.

On one screen, she forces her hand into her own mouth, distorting her features and stifling expression. On another, her eyes roll slowly back in her head, a physical as well as a symbolic turning inward. And so forth. The gestures have been slowed drastically and change almost imperceptibly, perhaps a reference to how self-censorship can arise almost unnoticed. The artist's face alternates on the screens with passages from the poem "Island Burden" (1947) by Cuban poet Virgilio Piñera, a kind of "Howl" for its time and place.

"I like to do ambient work, where I try to put people in a situation," Bruguera says. "I started out with drawings and paintings, but I couldn't feel whole in any of them. I think this is the medium in which I can get closer to the people who are receiving the work."

Of course, Bruguera is well aware that messages play very differently to audiences in different countries.

"Every country has certain censorship and self-censorship," she says. "In capitalist places, it has to do with the economy. As an artist, if you don't do something that is liked, the corporations won't buy the work or the collector won't collect it. In Cuba, it is strictly political, in the sense that there is a responsibility for the artist, who has been raised and educated for free, to not touch

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JOANNE HOYOUNG LEE — MERCURY NEWS

Tania Bruguera directs the construction of an installation at the San Francisco Art Institute involving hundreds of tea bags.