

*Carlos Garaicoa Exhibition*

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[Audio ROM sound sting]

Welcome to this overview of the Cuban artist Carlos Garaicoa and selected pieces of his work, currently on exhibit at the ROM. The intended audience for this podcast is people who are vision-impaired and those unable to attend in person. Please note it is not intended as a traditional audio-guide and therefore will not describe every object in detail, or follow the order in which they are presented in the exhibition.

A native of Havana, Cuba, Carlos Garaicoa is one of his country's leading contemporary artists, and has gained international acclaim for his work. The exhibition at the ROM focuses on recent examples of Garaicoa's architectural models, sculptural forms, drawings, photography, and video. He uses these media to reflect upon a number of issues, among them the importance of architecture as historical force; the failure of modernism as a catalyst for social change; and the decay of twentieth-century utopias.

As his birthplace and beloved home, the city of Havana has profoundly influenced Garaicoa's work. Once celebrated for its beauty, the city has deteriorated rapidly in recent decades due to many differing factors—among them the weak economy, general neglect, and the tumultuous tropical weather. Garaicoa has embraced this damaged urban environment as a point of reference for the majority of his work. This is especially evident in his "diptychs".

A diptych is a work made of two parts, usually with identical dimensions. In this case each part is based on one of Garaicoa's black-and-white photographs of Havana and is approximately 1.5 metres, or about five feet wide. The left-hand photo of the pair shows a building in a state of decay, abandoned but still standing. The right-hand photo shows the site after the building has been demolished and replaced by an empty lot. Superimposed on this second image is a network of coloured threads supported on pins that trace the ghostly shape of the former building. Each diptych is a Before-and-After document, and the thread-drawings remind the viewer of what has been lost.

But Garaicoa's work engages far more than modern Havana and Cuba. Some critics say he explores utopian themes, creating schemes of ideal architecture, or even ideal cities. Although Garaicoa rejects the label "utopian", it is evident why some observers might think of this word when reflecting upon his art. An example of this is the largest installation within the exhibition, entitled *From the series New Architectures*. It consists of 76 different shapes, each made of wire and rice paper suspended from the ceiling and softly lit from inside by electric lights. They resemble oddly-shaped Chinese lanterns. Some are curved and bulbous; others boxy and straight-edged. Still others are a strange combination of different geometric forms. The shapes, reminiscent of futuristic science-fiction imaginings from the 1950s, vary in length or height from half a metre (1½ feet) to over two metres, or six feet. At the

same time, despite their physical size, the structures seem fragile and vulnerable because of the delicate materials involved in their construction.

Garaicoa frequently works with scale models of buildings and other structures. Two such works are in this exhibition. The first, entitled *Campus or the Babel of knowledge*, includes two separate pieces: one piece sits on a waist-high table approximately 1.5 metres, or five feet square, and is a detailed model of a large, round, six-story multi-tiered building that stands 80 centimetres (2½ feet) tall. The other scale model sits on a table of the same height but larger – two metres, or six feet square – and is a landscape with six smaller versions of this building equally spaced around a central amphitheatre and interlocked via connecting passages.

The building on the smaller table resembles a circular step-pyramid, capped by a wide flat disk and ringed by four concentric flights of stairs that lead up to the base of the structure. Miniature people are shown inside the building as well as along the outside horizontal landings of the step-pyramid. Vertical ladders provide access between levels. Each level is divided into individual one-room spaces, each with a floor-to-ceiling window in place of the exterior wall and a doorway set into the window to provide entry. On the inner rear walls of the rooms are large back-lit images. Some of these pictures are of people. Others depict objects from nature. Still others show charts, diagrams or abstract shapes.

*Campus or the Babel of Knowledge* also includes two framed drawings and two videos that present two-dimensional views of the model building and the accompanying landscape. According to a text displayed nearby, written by Garaicoa, this multi-piece work is meant to represent a fictional university that imposes a highly oppressive way of life on its students.

The second of the two scale-model exhibits, entitled *Capablanca's Real Passion*, is a chessboard about one metre, or three feet wide, with squares elevated to different heights. Instead of standard chess pieces, Garaicoa populates the board with amazingly detailed miniature buildings – churches, palaces, arenas, skyscrapers, towers – some as tall as 14 centimetres (six inches). Half of these models resemble existing buildings, while the rest are of Garaicoa's own invention. The pieces are arranged as if in mid-game – historical buildings versus modern structures – with a few of the chess pieces captured and moved to the side of the board.

Pop-up books are another of Garaicoa's characteristic productions. These books attract Garaicoa because of the way they are constructed, which is architectural in concept. Architecture is a subject that fascinates Garaicoa, and pop-ups allow him to realize his ideas about buildings in a concrete way, and to recycle examples of his two-dimensional work in three-dimensional form. There are three of Garaicoa's pop-up books here at the ROM. Each is displayed open, and is about 30 centimetres, or 12 inches tall by 50 centimetres (20 inches) wide when closed. When open, the pages reach more than two metres, or six feet, in width. The popped-up buildings stand arrayed in a long, narrow, rolling landscape. The buildings in two of the books derive from Havana. The third book, entitled *Minneapolis, Mills*, recalls an industrial structure in Minneapolis, U.S.A. Garaicoa photographed the buildings in a state of decay or abandonment, just prior to their demolition.

At certain times each day, visitors will be allowed to handle one of Garaicoa's pop-up books in the lounge area just outside the entrance to the exhibition. During this period, anyone handling the books will be asked to wear white cotton gloves

provided by the Museum, and the session will be supervised by Museum staff. Please phone the Museum at 416.586.8000 for the schedule of these hands-on sessions.

The final area of the exhibit that we will be speaking about is entitled *The Room of My Negativity (II)*, and it illustrates an entirely different facet of Garaicoa's work. This installation piece consists of a large video screen and an arrangement of 45 wooden toy trains on the floor. The trains follow random, curving paths that lead toward the screen, and are connected to the screen's top right-hand corner with strings. The locomotives pull wooden letters on wheels instead of cars, and the letters spell out words in Spanish and English such as 'Coercion', 'Anarchy', 'Intolerance', and 'Dictatorship'. The large video screen presents those same words being shattered, broken, or smashed. The sound-track that accompanies the exhibit was created especially for it, and provides an individual composition for each word as it appears on-screen. *The Room of My Negativity* draws our attention to the profound defects of our species – the destructive forces, attitudes and passions that haunt our world and may ultimately threaten its survival.

The *Carlos Garaicoa* exhibition is brought to you by the ROM's Institute for Contemporary Culture. The ICC plays a vital role in a Museum whose collections embrace many civilizations, as well as *The record of nature through countless ages*. In the context of the ROM's lively documentation of history, the ICC explores current cultural issues through exhibitions, lectures, films, and other media. As the ROM's window on contemporary society, the Institute for Contemporary Culture is extremely pleased to present Carlos Garaicoa's first exhibition in Canada.

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