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Photographing the disappearing homes of Castro's Cuba

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House of Chino I © Werner Pawlok

All images courtesy LUMAS gallery

The German photographer Werner Pawlok captures the homes of Havana, highlighting the former decadence of the city, with its American classic cars and extravagant manor houses, now faded and crumbling as Cuba goes through a momentous period of change.

Werner Pawlok's Cuba is curiously melancholy. Though his interiors pop with primary colours, golden sunlight and the scuffmarks of generations, they're all infused with gentle sadness.

Life in Cuba is changing: as the country's relationship with the United States begins to normalise, decades of economic restrictions are beginning to ease. Now Pawlok, who's been photographing the country since 2004, has returned for a new series of photographs exclusively for LUMAS gallery, Mayfair, London, in advance of the exhibition *Viva Cuba!*, opening this September.

Pawlok's fascination with Cuba stems from his experiences in East Germany: "I was the first Western photographer who did a series in East Berlin, shooting for Helmut Lang and *Weiner* magazine," he says.

"What I found were morbid places, they didn't have the money to do proper renovation. It's the same situation in Cuba and it's this atmosphere that I fell in love with."

Pawlok has never been tempted to make a social project out of this work. "It's much more interesting to take pictures of these empty rooms," he says.

Yet every picture tells a story – of the people that lived there, and of Cuba as a whole. In *House of Chino*, the walls are studded with faded framed pictures of Che Guevara, his revolutionary vigour slyly contrasted with the broken backed chairs and kitsch religious paintings. Throughout the series, icons of luxury – chandeliers, bespoke antique furniture and beautiful tiled floors – are framed by damp-streaked walls and crumbling plaster.

Pawlok urges us to imagine the inhabitants of these rooms: "I don't want to tell you the stories I think of, because you will think of them. I think you should get inspired."

Much of the beauty in Pawlok's Cuban work emerges from aesthetically pleasing decay. Layers of peeling paint on the walls create patterns and colours that sometimes border on the psychedelic. Yet Pawlok explains that this is all disappearing under new development: "Since 2004 there's been a problem of people selling their houses in order leave the country. A lot of people want to because they've heard of family in Miami or Key West making a good living and they try to get to America. It's sad because they should build up Cuba with their new freedom."



San Miguel y Aguila I © Werner Pawlok

Consequently, finding these wonderful locations is growing ever more difficult. His original tactic was to drive around and spot interesting looking places. "From the outside we would say, okay this is a nice looking, inspiring villa. Then we rang the doorbell to see if we can get in. The interior tells me a story, I put up my camera and take the photos."

But Pawlok notes how much, after eleven years, things have changed. "[This time] we were searching like crazy. I thought, this is the end of the project."

But this isn't the end of his relationship with the country: "My next step is to do a show in Cuba and show Cubans these pictures. They're often ashamed of their places because they don't have money to renovate, but these pictures reveal so much unbelievable beauty and atmosphere. I want to make them understand what I was looking for".

Werner Pawlok: Viva Cuba! will exhibit at the LUMAS gallery from 29th September to 31st October. [More details here.](#)

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