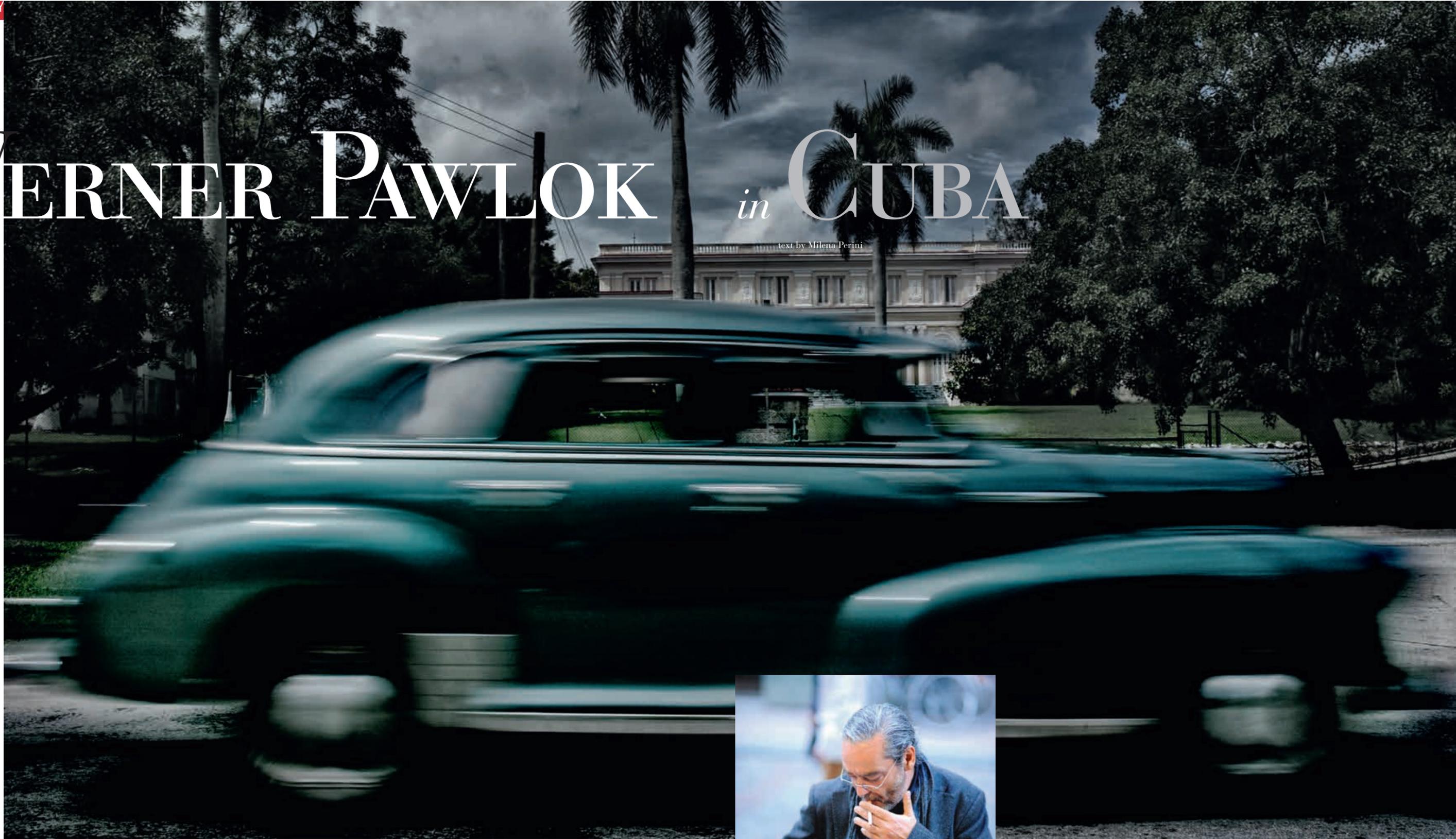


# WERNER PAWLOK *in* CUBA

text by Milena Perini



When Milena Perini visited the show **Cuba Expired** with Werner Pawlok's photos of Havana she had the luck to meet and interview the artist himself.



**Werner Pawlok**

"Everywhere else in the world where I had tried to see people's homes I had had trouble. But in Cuba there is such a sense of hospitality that the people were happy to have me and they gave me a warm welcome," says Werner Pawlok



I'm just back from a voyage of discovery to Havana, I wanted to show my daughter the city before it changed. I was very impressed by the decadent atmosphere. As soon as you arrive you feel enveloped in a world gone by. The people are open and friendly and don't seem to feel any difference at all between themselves and others. The beautiful buildings are crumbling, witnesses of times past. The roads are almost empty, the only cars are from the '50s as if it were an old American film. And above it all: enormous portraits of revolutionary heroes with their strong and victorious gazes.

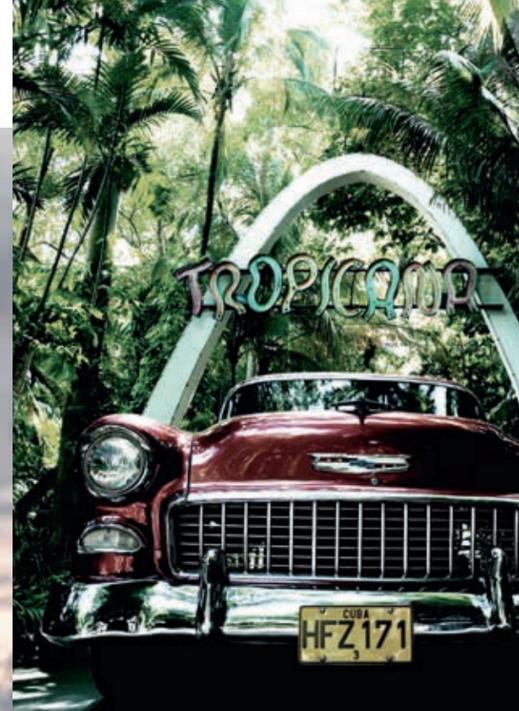
The images in Pawlok's show were very strong and they attracted me with the strong emotions they transmitted. I found myself looking at them again and again, never wanting to leave them. I met the artist and we had a long conversation on Havana, a city that had impressed both of us.

"In 1984," says the artist, "I was in East Berlin on a fashion shoot and was very impressed by the morbid atmosphere that hung around this ruined city. In 2004 I was in Cuba and I felt the same feeling, but much, much stronger. I was most impressed by the fact that I was in a place where time stood still but that at the same time was very vital. Historical buildings that once were elegant but that were now down at the heels had a special aura and I was enchanted.



"Layers of colour emerging from under other layers were a real work of art. No artist could have done a better job than what time had done. I was seized by a desire to see as many of those buildings as possible, to get to know them and to photograph them. I began to roam the city, stopping by the buildings that attracted me most. I would stop, ring the doorbell and ask if I could come in. Each time was like entering a film set. The rooms told stories of elegant couples that danced under chandeliers and I began to shoot as if in trance," says Pawlok of his Cuban project.



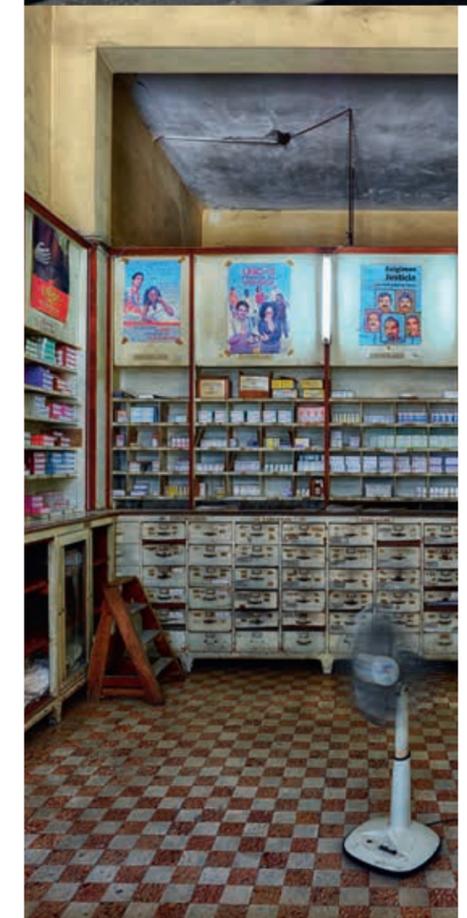


"As soon as I had the chance to enter one of them I was blown away by the patina of colours on the walls: they looked like paintings. Layers of colour emerging from under other layers were a real work of art. No artist could have done a better job than what time had done. I was seized by a desire to see as many of those buildings as possible, to get to know them and to photograph them.

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"Most of the people were happy to tell me a bit about the history of the places they were living in and one above all interested me, the one that had belonged to a woman named Mary McCarthy. She was born in 1900 and married Pedro, a leather exporter who had made a fortune supplying boots to the American army in WWII. In 1940 Pedro built his wife a beautiful home in the residential area of Havana. In those days Cuba was a millionaire's paradise: the night clubs had performances by stars like Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra who was also a neighbour of Mary's. The owners of the villas were always trying to out do each other with parties. After Pedro died in 1950 Mary inherited his vast wealth until it was confiscated by Castro. She was granted a stipend of 200 pesos a month, the equivalent of fifteen dollars. While most of the rich fled to Miami to wait out what they thought would be a brief crisis, Mary stayed on, swearing that she would never leave her island. She wasn't involved in politics and she was left to share Cuba's destiny. She died peacefully in Havana at 108 years old with her grandson Elio Garcia by her side. He told me her story as I was taking the pictures.

"Once I got back to Europe I set the Cuban photos aside until, in 2012, Heike Dander, curator of a photography gallery, asked me to publish them. These were photos that I had done for myself, inspired by the sleepy, dreamy atmosphere in those houses and I never thought that they would be as successful as they have been. I guess that the spell I fell under is captured in the images and is transmitted to people who see them, so much so that they never want to leave them."



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