

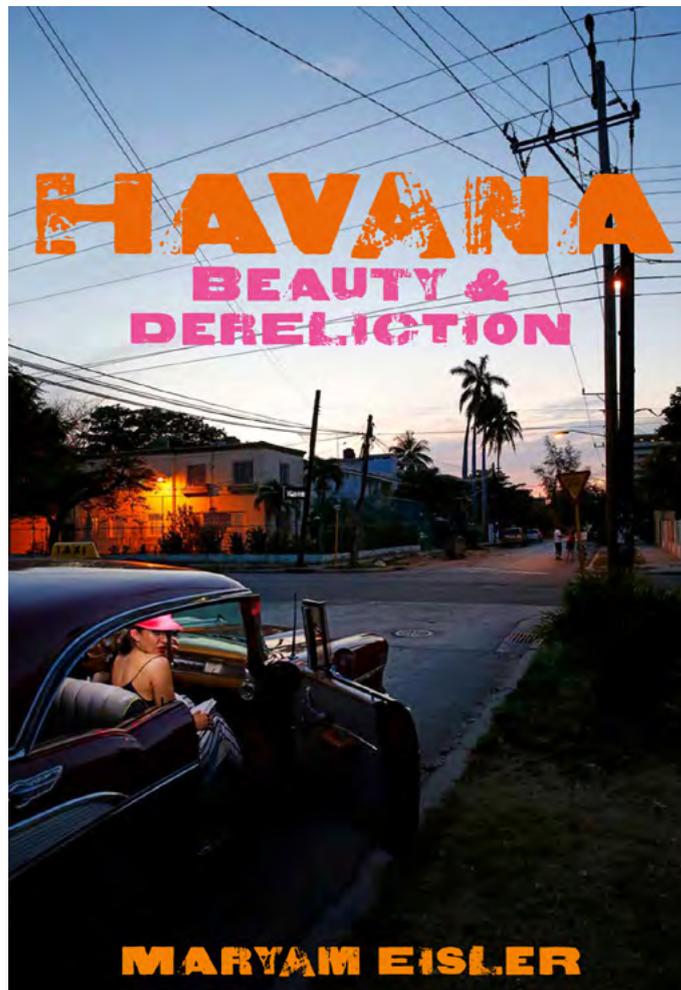
BERMONDSEY
PROJECT SPACE

Maryam Eisler:
Adventure & Obsession

18–30 September, 2018

Photographer Maryam Eisler presents images from two series *#She* and *Havana: Beauty and Dereliction* over the two floors of the gallery.

**Bermondsey
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It is sometimes impossible to distinguish between beauty and dereliction when it comes to history, art and architecture.

In Havana, this distinction becomes even more blurred. The former Spanish colonial capital city is a UNESCO world heritage site. Preserved in time, pickled since the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Nevertheless, beauty there is aplenty, as I found on my first visit in May 2017.

It was as if I'd entered a time-warp. The city's faded facades form some of the most wonderful Spanish colonial style architecture I've come across in Latin America. Photogenic people, the Cubans; they have an air of freedom born of necessity. Life's hard, very hard. So, make the best of it! Seems to be their philosophy.

In photography, this translates into whatever you want to make out of it. Showing the face of bankrupt ideologies, the crumbling socialist visage of resistance. And the eternal spirit of goodwill that comes from shared hardships and kind fellowship amongst humans.

Defiance was the word that struck me early on in my hunt for scenes to shoot. Scenarios to craft, fashioned out of the very little that existed. I could portray an elderly grand dame, say; Mrs Alonso whose salons in her grand mansion were the talk of town in their heyday. Now, an old

pensioner barely receiving \$10 a month, she is reduced to living in a house with crumbling ceilings, amongst some colourful mementoes imprinted in her memory, a vintage Silvertone record player, and the odd ornaments that time's ravages have left behind. Her class shows through, despite the not-so gentile poverty and through her choice of the French language to communicate with me. I could perhaps conjure Marcel Proust? But also a bit of magic surrealism: Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Isabelle Allende?

Can decay become diversity, I wonder? Asking the walls to reveal their secrets. If only they could talk. Can I wind the clock backwards and try to imagine the airs and graces of ladies who lunched in the extravagance of what used to be one of Latin America's richest, and most splendid of cities. Havana was a jewel, and it needed my photographer's diamond polished lens. Dust off the façade and add a dash of colourful pizzaz. A piece of furniture here. A cracked vase displayed over there. The dress the lady wore on her birthday sixty years ago. Let the old contrast with even older relics gathering dust, whether humans or objects. Havana is a city of pathos more than modern contradictions. The irony is that the city transforms decrepitude, turning it into something inviting. For the visitor, that is. We're blessed in our daily lives in European plenitude. Let the unfeeling camera spare a thought for lost graces that are still carried through the airs of haunted corridors of the city where two million souls reside.

This city that has become an open-air museum filled with nostalgia. For revolutionaries, there's Che and Fidel, their faces plastering every prominent public space. Demi-gods who have visited ruin on this rich land. Yet love and adorations still follow in their tracks, their words gospel to hungry ears.

And there's creativity. Pockets of talent bubbling to the surface where it can, seeking fresh, unpolluted political airs. Let's hope the bubbles don't pop in the continuing climate of political decay. And there's music, everywhere you turn a corner. Radio, guitar, drums, anything that conjures a bit of mood change. Salsa, Mambo, Rumba ... but also ballet. Yes, ballet. And very good they are, these kids who cannot afford ballet shoes and yet practice on the streets and the quiet of tucked away spaces in La Habana Vieja.

The city's contradictions extend into the minds of its people. The younger generation dream of Miami and New York, whilst the old cling on to the faded revolutionary rhetoric of the past. Like older generations everywhere, change is feared.

If you want drama and music, dance and the poetry of motion with young beautiful people walking as if in a ballad of the fifties, go for a walk on the Malecon in the evenings. Watch imaginary Al Capones and Che Guevaras ride past in a 1955 Plymouth Belvedere. A massive Cohiba showing what history can magic-up in the itinerant photographer's mind!