

Fabiola Santiago: Cuban artist El Sexto played by the rules of engagement — and got burned

HIGHLIGHTS

Artist named two piglets he painted Fidel and Raúl

He was detained for nine months without trial

He has been on a hunger strike for 22 days



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Cuban graffiti artist Danilo Maldonado, aka “El Sexto,” played by the rules of the people-to-people policy so highly regarded in these days of rapprochement.

Early last year, the young artist participated in a ground-breaking educational scholarship program at Miami Dade College, traveling from Havana to study English, computing, business and social studies.

No surprise to anyone, about half of the class of 17 young Cubans stayed in the United States, taking advantage of the Cuban Adjustment Act to remain and become a resident.

But not Maldonado. He returned to his homeland, his soul recharged with ideas about artistic expression and pushing the limits of censorship. His experiences made him want all the more to be a part of the brave, bold generation challenging the status quo in a Cuba stuck in the dark ages of totalitarianism.

Isn't that the point of cultural exchange programs and the "people-to-people contact" lauded in speech after speech? Americans travel to Cuba and share values — an army of peacemakers breaking through barriers. Cubans travel to the United States, experience democracy and take back what they've learned, contributing to change.

Only in theory, it seems.

Not long after his return, El Sexto was arrested in December for attempting a performance featuring two pigs named Fidel and Raúl. He planned to let them roam around Havana's Central Park, but was detained before he could get there. The reason: disrespect of national figures. Yet Maldonado hasn't been formally charged in the ensuing nine months of imprisonment.

Typical Castro style: Throw away the key, ask questions later. His mother, Maria Victoria Machado, says his jailers only give her the run-around and set dates for a release that never comes. "He committed no crime," she says in a video.

To protest, Maldonado, the father of a toddler, has been on a water-only hunger strike since Sept. 8.

At the United Nations on Monday, President Barack Obama once again publicly extolled the virtues of the people-to-people policy he has taken to a whole new level, lifting every restriction on travel and trade with Cuba he can possibly remove without congressional approval.

But in the afterglow of the American olive branch, Cuba has continued to operate with the same repressive stance of the last 56 years.

"I believe a government that suppresses peaceful dissent is not showing strength; it is showing weakness and it is showing fear," Obama told the U.N.

I couldn't agree more. But at some point the Castro regime has to be held accountable for the flagrant abuses of international human-rights principles it hypocritically claims to embrace in the presence of world leaders. So far, the only thing Castro has brought to the diplomatic table is a laundry list of demands and power grabs.

As for Raúl Castro, he has only himself to blame for the satirical depiction by the artist.

He demands respect and gives none, certainly not to "the people of Cuba," in whose name all the political theater is being staged.

Freedom-loving people should demand that El Sexto, a brave artist who tasted freedom all too briefly, be released before it's too late.

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