

## FEATURES

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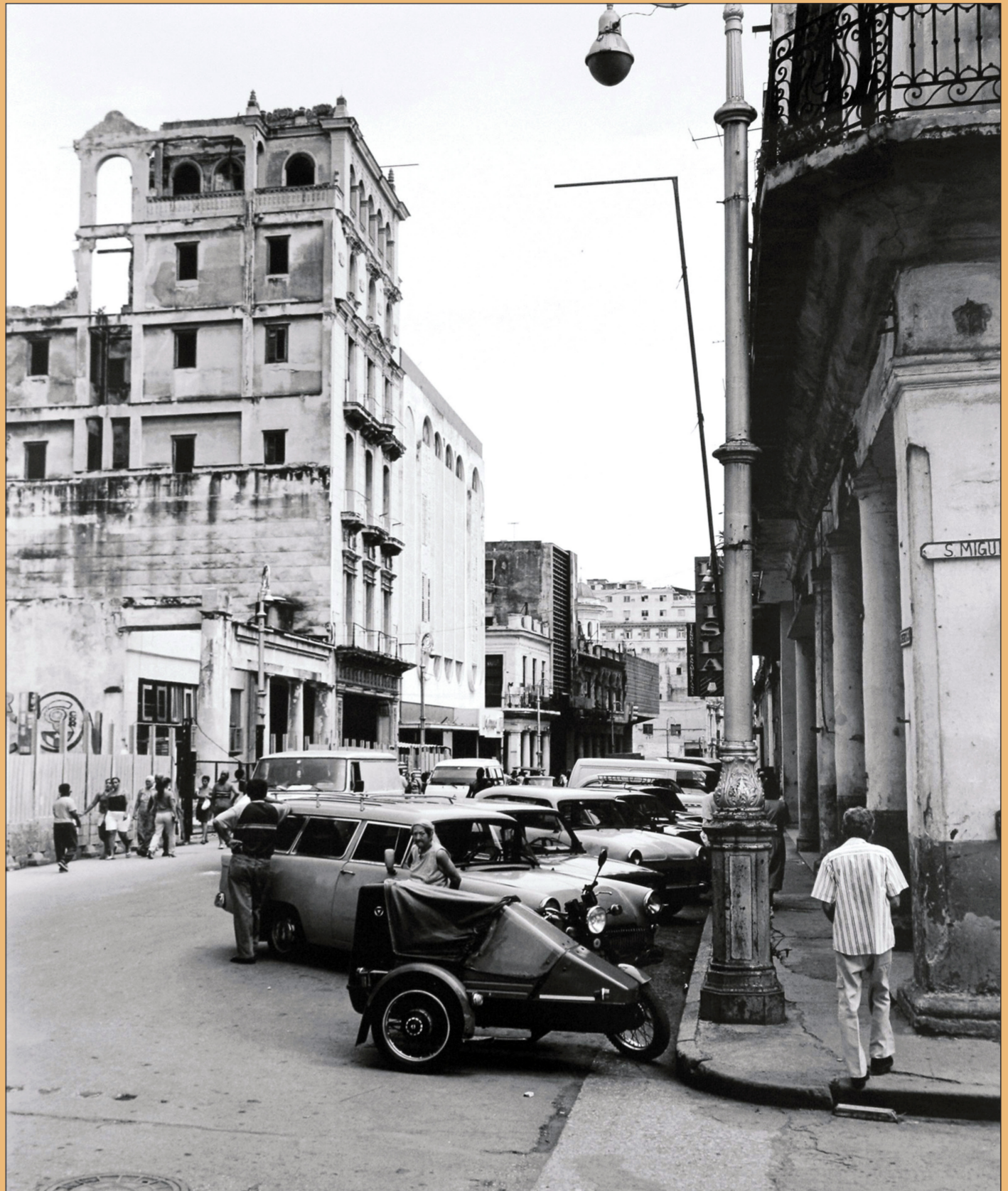
SATURDAY, APRIL 11, 2009



# The color of Cuba

Keith Brown's black-and-white photographs provide an unsentimental look at Cuba's people and urban landscapes

BY NOAH BUCHAN  
STAFF REPORTER



Clockwise from the top: Keith Brown's *Socialism or Death*, *Street Corner* and *The Rum Drinkers*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PETHANY LARSEN GALLERY

American photographer Keith Brown had just arrived in Cuba when he found himself caught in a torrential downpour. While huddling under a cluster of palm trees — a huge bouquet of flowers in one hand and an unopened bottle of rum in the other — an elderly woman motioned him over and offered him shelter.

"I'm sitting in her apartment and her son comes in and her neighbors come down [from upstairs]. I opened up the bottle of rum and we passed it around ... just talking as best we could," Brown told the *Taipei Times*.

When the rain ceased, Brown departed — though not before leaving a few gifts. "I gave her half the flowers and left the bottle of rum," he said.

This anecdote is one of many that Brown recounts while discussing his photography exhibit *Cuba: The Island Garden*, which

opened last week at Pethany Larson Gallery, in Taipei. Although the 34-year-old Brown didn't take a picture of his elderly host, the story is indicative of the generosity of the island's inhabitants.

The 20 photos in the exhibit — taken between 2003 and 2005 — are the first installment in a series that Brown plans to do on the urban landscapes and peoples of Latin America. He said his interest in one of the world's last bastions of communism stems from the island's relationship with the US.

"Very little is known about [Cuba in the US] and a lot that is known is misunderstood or is just propaganda. The Cuban government tends to promote the best things and the US government tends to highlight the worst," he said.

Considering the tense relations between the two countries over the past five decades, Brown said he was often amazed by the curiosity of Cubans towards him and their willingness to be his subjects.

"They wanted me to take their photographs," he said. "I've never been

anywhere and photographed people that were so willing. That's why you see a lot of portraits in this [series]."

Many of these portraits show young Cubans on their daily rounds. *The Rum Drinkers* depicts four grinning adults relaxing out front of a shabby home, glasses of rum at their feet. Their smiling faces contrast the poverty that surrounds them.

A young girl sits on a rickety barstool in *Girl With Adorable Smile*. Her face radiates shy delight at being photographed. In her hand she holds a pad of paper.

*The Old Baby* shows an older-timer sitting on a chair behind metal bars staring directly, almost confrontationally, at the camera. The subject's thin body hidden under ragged clothes in *Grouchy Old Man* suggests a life mired in poverty and hardship.

The photographs of Cuba's urban centers capture both the island's deteriorating cityscapes and the majesty of

its historic buildings.

While some images allude to Cuba's colonial past, others seem to serve as symbols of the country's official communist ideology. The title of the work *Socialism or Death* was taken from a slogan etched on a crumbling cement tablet.

Brown avoids the trap of photographing clichés. There are no images of heroic revolutionaries orating in front of Baroque buildings. Nor are there cigar-smoking, mojito-drinking, jazz-playing Cubans. Instead he directs our attention to the friendliness of everyday people and the island's poverty. Combined, *Cuba: The Island Garden* creates a sympathetic, yet unsentimental, picture of a complex society.

#### EXHIBITION NOTES:

**What:** Cuba: The Island Garden

**Where:** Pethany Larsen Gallery (Pethany Larsen 藝坊), 30, Ln 45 Liaoning St, Taipei City (台北市遼寧街45巷30號). Open Tuesdays through Sundays from 11 am to 8 pm. **Tel:** (02) 8772-5005

**When:** Until May 17

**On the Net:** www.pethanylarsen.com

## [ SOCIETY ]

# Tying the knot frees victim of violence

Mukhtar Mai, who was gang-raped as punishment for her brother's alleged infidelity, faced an outcast's life of loneliness until she married

AFP, MEERWALA, PAKISTAN

Pakistani gang-rape victim Mukhtar Mai, who won tragic fame in the West as the cause celebre of oppressed women, is all smiles since marrying a police constable and defying yet another stigma.

Ensnared in a bungalow with air conditioning, sofas and a computer, the woman who can read only some of Pakistan's national language Urdu and admits the English alphabet is beyond her has never been happier.

Seven years after her ordeal, she may still be a pariah among illiterate and older women but her transformation from victim to queen of her own destiny is complete since becoming the second wife of Nasir Abbas Gabol.

"Marriage gives you a sense of responsibility. It is a sacred relationship. You also get a sense of security and protection and a woman gets the status of mother," the 39-year-old said.

"He says he fell head over heels for me," she gushed of her new husband.

Mai runs three schools — two for girls and one for boys — where around 1,000 children from poor families get an education. She heads

a staff of 38, half of them teachers, the rest working in her office and welfare centers.

They shelter female victims of violence who seek refuge with Mai, organize seminars to boost awareness of rights, dispense legal aid and operate a mobile unit that reaches out to women in their communities.

Human rights groups say Pakistani women suffer severe discrimination, endure domestic violence, fall victim to "honor" killings, and that growing Islamist fundamentalism leaves them increasingly isolated.

Mai's village of Meerwala, a backwater 120km southwest of Multan in the Punjab countryside is isolated from the glittering sophistication of the cities.

It has no hotel. The small market is confined to grocery shops, cold drinks and cigarette kiosks, and vegetable sellers in makeshift wooden cabins. People are farmers or small landowners who cultivate cotton, wheat and vegetables.

Mai was gang-raped here in June 2002 on the orders of a village council as a punishment when her younger brother, who was 12 or 13 years old at the time, was wrongly accused of having illicit



Mukhtar Mai, far right, poses with her groom, Nasir Abbas Gabol, and his first wife, Shela Kiran, during Mai's wedding ceremony in Meerwala, Pakistan. PHOTO: AFP

relations with a woman from a rival clan.

In conservative and patriarchal Pakistan, rape victims frequently kill themselves. Those who don't live as social outcasts abandoned by their families. There is no prospect of marriage.

But Mai has defied the norm.

Gabol was part of Mai's security detail after she took her rapists to court and has been in love with the brown-eyed girl for years.

Nine years her junior, Gabol first proposed

in 2007.

When he was rejected he tried to kill himself with an overdose of sleeping pills.

"The morning after he attempted suicide, his wife and parents met my parents but I still refused," Mai said.

Gabol then threatened to divorce his first wife, Shela Kiran.

Panicked at the prospect of enduring the stigma of divorce, Shela sought to persuade Mai — who was married and divorced before her rape — to consent to becoming a second wife.

In Pakistan, steeped in Islamic law, a man can have up to four wives, provided each wife gives permission to subsequent unions, and as long as he promises to devote equal time and attention to each.

On Mai's insistence, Gabol transferred ownership of his family house to his first wife, agreed to give her a plot of land and a monthly income — all designed to guarantee Shela's rights.

In exchange, Mai tied the knot.

But she has no intention of moving to her husband's village, away from the hive of activity she has created here with the help of aid money.

"I have seen pain and happiness in Meerwala. I cannot think of leaving this place," she said.

Meerwala is where she became a beacon of hope for voiceless and oppressed women after successfully challenging her attackers in court.

She won international renown for her bravery, became *Glamour* magazine's woman of the year in 2005, and wrote an autobiography.

Her determination was all the more remarkable given her lack of education.

"I can read and write Urdu a little but I don't know English. The teachers at my schools try to teach me the ABC but I always forget," she said.

The groom, in the first flush of newly married bliss, said he will be a loyal foot soldier in Mai's struggle for female emancipation.

"I am happy and thank God that I've married a woman who is known worldwide," Abbas said. "I will work shoulder to shoulder and fully support Mukhtar Mai in her struggle for women's emancipation."

His first wife, bright eyed, was happy to chat to reporters.

"She is a good woman. I like her and we will live like sisters," she said.