

# Weekend

Arts & Performance

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Carlos Estevez is making a splash with an impressive new exhibit at the Huntington Gallery of the Massachusetts College of Art.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JANET K

## A message in the bottles

Cuban artist's floating metaphors arrive in Boston

By Christine Temin  
GLOBE STAFF

Carlos Estevez makes art only to throw it away — for the most poetic of purposes. He rolls his drawings into tight cylinders, stuffs them into narrow-necked bottles of various shapes and hues, and tosses them into the ocean, along with notes asking anyone who happens to find one to get in touch via e-mail. Estevez is Cuban, and hurling messages into the ocean is, he says, “a way to communicate with the rest of the world.”

He says this, however, while standing in the Huntington Gallery at the Massachusetts College of Art, where he had a recent two-month residency in preparation for his current

show there. His bottled communiques are metaphor, not necessity. He may hail from a politically isolated island, but he gets around. Like numerous Cuban artists, he can come and go as he pleases, as long as a foreign institution pays his way and he returns with hard currency. His schedule in the immediate future includes bottle-throwing events in Mexico, Norway, and China, which gets three throws, he says, “because it’s so big.”

While his work is identifiably Cuban in imagery, materials, and techniques, it also does what he hopes his bottles will — connect to the larger world. Estevez is among the international artists whose methodology includes trawling junkyards, staging urban archeology “digs,” exploring the interface of art and science, using chance procedures, and collaborating with students, as Estevez did at MassArt.

He seized on the bottle idea after seeing his 9-year-old son doing a play version of the same thing, stuffing messages such as “send medicine” into plastic Pepsi bottles. “That deto-

nated my bottle project,” his father says. The boy’s role in his father’s work is ongoing. Before each throw, the boy picks a paper out of a box at random. Each paper identifies a particular drawing, and that’s the next to go. It’s an art version of Russian roulette.

Estevez, now 32, was one of the stars of the 2000 Havana Bienal, which the cocurators of the MassArt show, Jeffrey Keough and Lisa Tung, attended. They glommed onto him immediately because, Keough says, “he demonstrates that art and culture trump politics. There’s no embargo on this guy’s imagination.”

At the Havana Bienal, a slew of foreign curators hovered around certain artists, including Estevez, exuding a sense of near-desperation to sign them up before another museum did. His installation, located in a barrel-vaulted Spanish fort high above the Havana harbor, was a bottle and drawing piece, a precursor to his work at MassArt.

At the Havana Bienal, the inevitable question came up: If

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*'People make things from nothing. You have to invent everything.'*

CARLOS ESTEVEZ, on life in his native Havana

## No bottleneck in imagination of Cuba's Carlos Estevez

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a well-funded museum or collector offered him a million dollars for the work, would he toss out his project's premise or keep tossing the bottles into the sea? Estevez stuck to the latter, although, he said, "I would cry a little."

Would-be buyers of the drawings are crying, too, at the idea of these works' being discarded. Estevez's drawings — long, vertical scrolls on paper heavy with linen fiber — are exquisitely drawn and dense with imagery. The human figure is at the heart of his work, but the phantasms he depicts can morph into plants or animals, sprout other people, or contain enough buildings in different styles to constitute a mini-history of architecture. Superimposed on a drawing of a footprint, for instance, is the floor plan of a round, Romanesque church with radiating chapels that overlap with the footprint's toes.

The porousness of people, their connection with a world that passes right through them, is one of Estevez's continuing obsessions. So is the concept of the container, whether it's the bottles or the images on a huge brown-paper banner at MassArt, which could illustrate the song "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." A giant hand appears on either side of the paper, which hangs vertically in the gallery. On one side, the hand holds the heavens — sun, stars, constellations both actual and fictional — while the other side is devoted to earthly cartography, deliberately drawn without perspective, so that buildings appear to be on top of one another rather than in front or behind.

Marionettes, looking as helpless as the sad puppet Petrushka, are another recurring motif. "The world is a theater," Estevez says. "Our strings are being pulled all the time. Our strings are our nature."

His new drawings on black paper, made at MassArt, are particularly cosmic. (They're also for sale.) Like all of Estevez's figures, those in this series are made of dots connected by lines. They, too, look like constellations, especially

against the nocturnal black ground. They resemble the results of a recently developed computer process called "Motion Capture," which documents dancing through dots and lines of light, draining the individual dancer out of the picture to create an archetype.

Many artists would find the prospect of filling MassArt's Huntington Gallery daunting. The space has 5,000 square feet, with ceilings 40 feet high, plus a balcony. Estevez luxuriates in all the room, boldly defining it. A shelf with the bottles covers two entire walls, and on the balcony hang some of the black drawings. Both are effective from a distance as well as close up. The banner, more than 16 feet long, slices and defines the center of the space.

The largest piece in the show is a sizable one-room house, with the exterior made of splintered wood, rusting metal, and fragments of traffic signs, and the interior of flea-market finds, photocopies of pages from books on subjects ranging from plants to airplanes to anatomy, and Estevez's personal pantheon of puppets. One wall is loaded with 3-D likenesses of his heroes, including Bach, Charlie Chaplin, and James Joyce.

On an adjacent wall, in splendid isolation, is a puppet of Leonardo da Vinci, which gives you a sense of Estevez's values. He, like the quintessential Renaissance man, is insatiably curious; a favorite pastime is poring over encyclopedias.

The inspiration for the MassArt house was the typical home in Havana, where, Estevez says, "people make things from nothing. You have to invent everything. Every house is unique and everything is mixed together: 15th-century furniture, new CD players, battered appliances. Every object claims to be a protagonist on the stage of life."

Hanging from the ceiling of Estevez's house is a large model airplane, its components including an ironing board. Airplanes and boats are ubiquitous in the art of a nation whose citizens, at least a good number of them, dream of escape. Estevez doesn't. "I am Cu-



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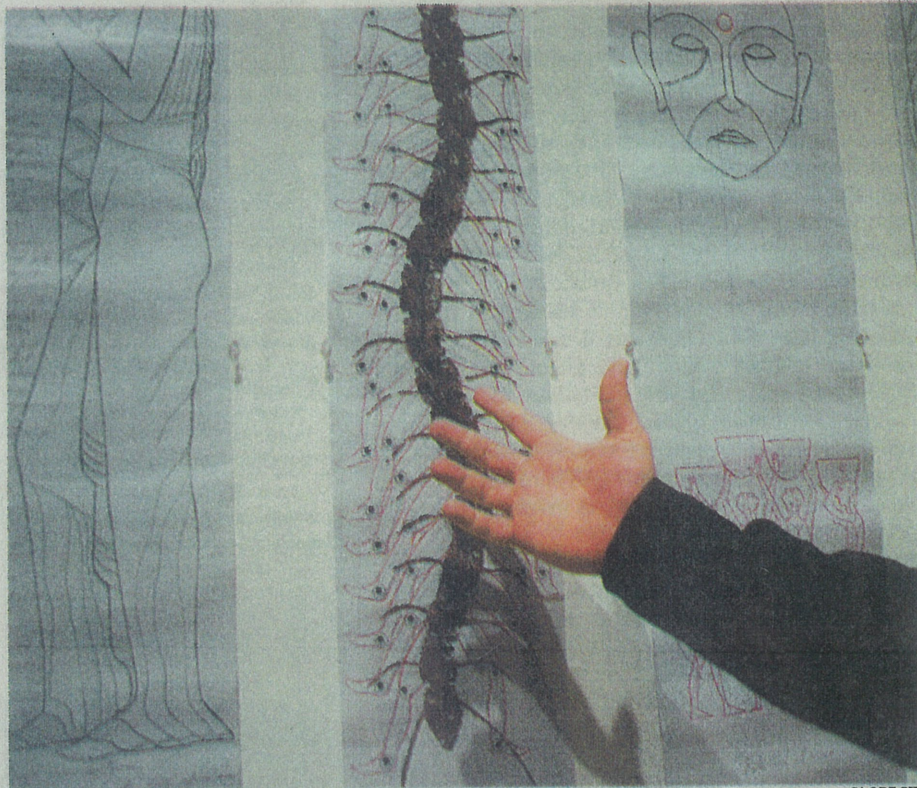
Works by Carlos Estevez (above) include exquisitely drawn scrolls destined to be stuffed into bottles and tossed in

ban," he says resolutely, noting that he doesn't mind material scarcity. "Here you can buy everything, but it comes with no history."

He says he thrives on the improvisational quality of life in Havana. "There is no set schedule to life. There are always surprises. Here, you can be 99.9 percent sure that a letter you send from one place to another will arrive there. In Cuba, you can be 99.9 percent sure it won't. Where it ends up is a surprise."

The fourth major piece in this extraordinary show is a video projected on a rectangle of sand on the floor. The sand speaks not only of islands, but of impermanence, as in the phrases "shifting sands" and "written in sand." Projected onto the sand is a video of Estevez hurling his bottles into the ocean. Each time he throws one into the deep, the act is videotaped.

As the number of bottles diminishes, the video will grow longer, becoming a visual elegy to an ephemeral art.



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The human figure is at the heart of work by Carlos Estevez at the Huntington Gal