

Review by Carl Mellor

"Joe Guerriero: Waiting for Normal. Cuba and the United States," on display at the ArtRage Gallery, combines several elements. It samples a body of work that Guerriero has created over the past 20 years. He's documented Cuba through a large portfolio of photos and a couple of films. It celebrates a sense of community in locales ranging from Havana to smaller cities and towns. And it expresses hope that someday relations between Cuba and the United States will be normalized, leading to the end of a trade embargo in force for almost 60 years.

First, Guerriero has a gift for interpreting everyday scenes in his color photos. For example, one image depicts four men, and a cat, hanging out in front of a butcher shop in Havana. The work captures not only their physical presence but also the mood of their interaction.

In Remedios, a small city of roughly 46,000 citizens, a public-works crew sweeps a street before laying down new pavement. There Guerriero depicts their brooms stirring up dust in fine detail.

Elsewhere, there are images working off of specific items. The photos of Raul, a carpenter, document antique tools and pieces of used lumber he recycles in his trade. And a shot of fishermen heading out into Havana's harbor centers on the boats they built not from wood but from Styrofoam.

In addition, Guerriero emphasizes the vitality of Cuban cultural work as seen in images of Danza Voluminosa, a dance troupe for full-bodied women, and of a figurative painter perusing a piece full of bright colors. One of the best photos in the exhibition portrays a teenager playing a saxophone near a building with fading paint; she's enjoying a moment of joy.

The exhibit also moves out into the countryside. Guerriero photographed the Manaca Iznaga Tower, a 147-foot structure built over 200 years ago. It was originally constructed by slaveowners as a tool for surveillance. In the contemporary era, it's served as a tourist attraction.

In the Valley of Vinales, an area known for tobacco growing, Guerriero created a panoramic shot depicting hills in the distance. By comparison, a man on a bike and a horse seem insignificant. The image has thick, rich color that almost suggests an oil painting.

And the show has other photos portraying day-to-day life: shots of four boys playing soccer, a man tending to a bird cage; a passer-by wearing an American flag shirt and talking to a motorist. They are supplemented by images dealing directly with economic reality in Cuba. A photo of a pharmacy details sparsely stocked shelves. A city street is marked by large potholes. These and other images develop one of the show's major themes: the trade embargo has caused shortages of basic goods on an ongoing basis and severely impacts life in Cuba.

Guerriero, who advocates for an end to the embargo, readily acknowledges that this is a complex and controversial topic. For his documentary "Curtain of Water," which premiered in 2013, he interviewed people for and against the embargo. Vicente Echerrri, a poet and Cuban exile, vehemently opposed a change in U. S. policy.

At the same time, Guerriero, in his artist's statement and in text accompanying some of the photos, alludes to possibilities for change and to his strong belief that the United States and Cuba can co-exist positively and peacefully. He will discuss the exhibition and the issue of the embargo during a Zoom conversation which will take place on November 12, 2020 between 7:00 and 8:30 p.m. Contact ArtRage to sign up for that session.

"Joe Guerriero: Waiting for Normal" is on display through January 17, 2021 at ArtRage, 505 Hawley Ave. The gallery is open from noon to six p.m. on Thursday and Friday and from noon to four p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. Visitors to ArtRage should wear a mask, practice social distancing and make a reservation by calling 315-218-5711 or going to www.artragegallery.org.

Carl Mellor covered visual arts for the Syracuse New Times for over 20 years. He continues to write about exhibits and artists in the Syracuse area.