HEALTHCARE in Cuba
AN ARTIST’S REFLECTION ON COMMUNAL APPROACHES TO HEALING
Photos by Carlton Mackey
CUBA IS A PLACE OF DUALITY AND COMPLEXITY.

An almost tangible tension between conflicting ideals pulls at every corner. On one hand, there is grandeur, history, and splendor. On the other, there is decay and obvious fragility. From the delicate buildings to the strength of the people, this is Cuba.

WOVEN INTO THE FABRIC OF CUBAN LIFE IS AN UNWAVERING EMPHASIS ON CARE.

As an outsider, it seemed to me that great poles also existed around the idea of care. In Socialist and Communist governments, it is typically assumed that the responsibility for providing care lies with the government. The government owns all money and therefore has all control. From birth to death, citizens are supposed to be able to count on health coverage. That is one of the greatest rewards of this system. Everyone – including the Cubans – echoes the sentiment that Cuba has the best doctors in the world. Yet in Cuba, the responsibility for care does not seem to be placed solely on doctors, but instead on the entire community.

Not all care – and certainly not one's entire state of well-being – is dependent on a healthcare system. The government certainly bears most of the responsibility, but it often falls short of its promise. Even in a free healthcare context, there are needs that are not met. Because of this, there is both tension and beauty in the question of who bears responsibility. It’s remarkable to see how the areas not covered by governmental healthcare are attended to by the community instead.

Being Cuban seems to mean binding together to meet the needs of the people around you. My observations as an outsider mainly revolved around the way the Cuban people came together and supported one another, as marginalized communities often do. This series of photos reveals instances of individuals and communities being cared for by individuals and communities.

RELIGION AND FAITH PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN CUBAN SOCIETY.

People rely and call upon their faith to address both needs that are physical and needs that are more than physical. It is said anecdotally that people go to hospitals, receive medical treatment, leave hospitals, and then visit their own spiritual practitioners. This combination of spiritual care and physical care is one of the defining aspects of Cuban culture. Several locations, such as the Convento de Belen, served as places for spiritual practice as well as places that satisfy other community needs.
There is also support cultivated by and provided by being in community. Cuban familial bonds are strong and friendship is powerful. Community is fundamental to Cuban existence.

THE WORST DISEASE – SOMETIMES THE WORST SYMPTOM OF DISEASE – IS ISOLATION. THAT BEING SAID, I DIDN’T SEE A LOT OF SICK PEOPLE.

Senior citizens take noticeable initiative in their own lives, as well. The Senior Center at Convento de Belen is run by senior citizens for senior citizens. Touring the center, we were told how important it is for them to create their own communities. They find power in autonomy, leaving the house and knowing they can look forward to having friends, having a social life, connecting with people, and interacting with others that understand what they’re going through. Being cared for while still having fun, they exercise, sing, hold cultural performances, put on talent shows, knit, and crochet. They find ways to fulfill their own needs.

IT ISN’T AN OUTREACH. NO ONE IS SAYING, “LET US HELP YOU.” THEY ARE HELPING THEMSELVES.

Cuban people dedicate their lives to caring for others. This is made especially evident in their treatment of children. Young people have needs. They have emotional needs, and they need to feel safe. Entire families step in to meet those needs. Children can be seen everywhere with mothers, aunts, grandparents, and relatives. Convento de Belen, a school and social service agency, provides them with that sense of safety, that sense of self. It lends care to children that otherwise wouldn’t have it – children who are victims of marginalization, oppression, misfortune, or despair. They sing and raise their hands, answering questions and reveling in the feeling of accomplishment that follows. In their lives, this school is a blessing. It’s their community.

COMMUNITY. CARE. COMPASSION. THIS ISN’T JUST IN CUBA. THIS IS WHAT WE ALL LONG FOR.