



# SHOOTING the REVOLUTION

Cuban photos find an unlikely port of entry in Oxford by Gary Bridgman

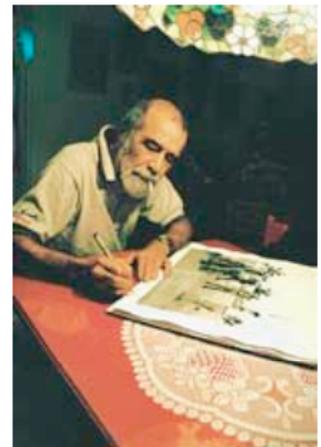
Oxford, Mississippi's postcard-ready Courthouse Square would seem an odd place to find Cuban photography and fine art. Even if the Square is steadily mutating into a moonlight-and-magnolia Aspen, visitors are often surprised by the scope of Southside Gallery's collection, according to gallery owner and photographer Milly Moorhead. Then again, this small, Deep South town would be an odd place for military roadblocks, Soviet missiles, and death threats from Miami.

This is not as complicated as it sounds.

Three events, seemingly unconnected, straddling the summer and fall of 1962, drew worldwide attention and created a dramatic backdrop to Moorhead's arrival in Oxford. The first event was the death of William Faulkner, who was quickly replaced as Oxford's most famous living resident by James Meredith, soon to be the University of Mississippi's first African-American student. The second event was his enrollment, or rather the resulting riots that took place on the Ole Miss campus. Nearly 40,000 national guardsmen descended on the town of 8,000 to quell the violence. These "peacekeeping forces" were Moorhead's welcoming committee to Oxford. Her family moved there from Memphis when her widowed mother enrolled in the Ole Miss School of Pharmacy that semester while Moorhead enrolled in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

"We were stopped as we came into town by National Guard troops," said Moorhead, a native of Rosedale, Mississippi. "They searched our car. There were tanks and other military vehicles lining North Lamar Boulevard."

The following month, Oxford residents (along with most of the planet's population) were briefly distracted from the Meredith crisis by the third event, which was one of the few things more sinister than race riots. That October witnessed the world on the edge of nuclear Armageddon as Kennedy and Khrushchev each waited for the other to blink over the placement of medium-range ballistic missiles on Cuban soil.



Havana, Cuba; April 2000: Alberto Korta sits in his apartment in Havana and signs a print of his *El Juego de Golf* photograph.

**PHOTOGRAPH BY MILLY MOORHEAD**

It would be many years before the people of Oxford heard about a quip Kennedy made at their expense that month. “Can they hit Oxford, Mississippi?” he wondered aloud to Arthur Lundahl, director of the CIA's National Photographic Interpretation Center, who was giving the president an early briefing on the situation.

Kennedy was still smarting from the previous month's crisis in Oxford, which put him at cross-purposes with a recalcitrant Governor Ross Barnett of Mississippi and U.S. Army generals whose hesitation to dispatch troops to northern Mississippi bordered on insubordination.

**M**oorhead was already fascinated with Cuba when captured tanks lined the boulevards of Havana in the wake of Fidel Castro's 1959-60 revolution. “Well, I always loved the show, *I Love Lucy*, growing up, and whenever my friends talked about places to travel, I said that I wanted to go to Cuba. Later, my interest had nothing to do with politics or even art, but simply a desire to be in this mysterious place.”

Jobs and family got in the way of her travel dreams until 1995, three years after she co-founded Southside Gallery, when Mississippi painter William Dunlap told her about the Center for Cuban Studies' art trips to the island. The following spring she realized her youthful dream while finding new friends and business contacts in Cuba. This past April she completed her 11<sup>th</sup> trip there—this time to arrange a show of her own photography, slated for November in Havana. She also brought back a fresh supply of revolutionary-era photographs by Alberto Korda, the most famous of Cuba's photojournalists.

Alberto Diaz Gutierrez adopted “Korda” as both his surname and as the name of his Havana studio because it sounded like “Kodak,” he said in a recent interview. Naming oneself, however obliquely, after a U.S. corporation isn't really the best way to make inroads with Marxist revolutionaries, but Korda excelled on the strength of his skill, not his political beliefs.

Notoriety followed Korda's family. His former wife, Norka, had been one of Korda's favorite models during his thriving, pre-revolutionary,

“Can they  
hit Oxford,  
Mississippi?”  
President John F. Kennedy

fashion photography career. In 1965, she caused a stir in Paris, showing up for a major fashion show wearing Cuban army fatigues.

Despite a body of work spanning 12 years of revolutionary Cuba, Korda is invariably identified by one image, *Guerrillero Heroico*, of a scowling, yet beatific, Ernesto “Che” Guevara. [see photos below] It remains one of the most widely reproduced photographic images in the world. (Similarly, while Southside Gallery is known to far-flung collectors mainly for Cuban photography, most of the gallery’s actual space is devoted to Southern painters.)

*Guerrillero Heroico* is one of several Korda prints Moorhead keeps in stock. On each visit to Cuba, she takes a supply of photographic paper and developing chemicals (both are scarce there) to Korda’s home and visits with his family while he develops new prints from his fragile, old negatives and later signs them in his heavy scribble.

Since 1970, Korda seems to have spent far more time printing his old photographs as opposed to taking new ones. He had been sporadically selling them out of his house for years, but only by appointment and only when he had access to photographic paper and chemicals. In 1996, the time of Moorhead’s first Cuba trip, he was charging \$250 for each photograph. Today his photographs can be purchased in New York, Michigan and Los Angeles, where a gallery is retailing them for \$950. Southside Gallery has sold about 50 of Korda’s photographs to date, with prices ranging from \$300 to \$700.

“He’s doing all right,” Moorhead said. “I’m glad, since he went for forty years without really being recognized outside of Cuba for his great Che photo.”

Cuban art, regardless of the medium, continues to draw increasingly international attention. Painters working on the island today are producing more dynamic work than many of their Caribbean and Latin American neighbors, almost as if they are feeding off their own isolation and scarcity. Being cut off from American culture for 40 years and Soviet rubles for a decade, today’s Cubans are fostering intensity in their creative pursuits, and art collectors are responding. The best photography,

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Milly Moorhead

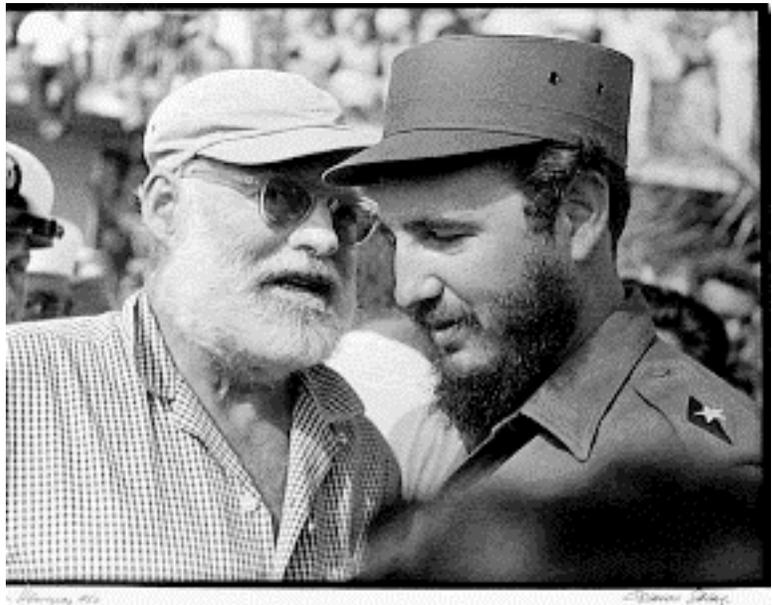
however, was produced from 1959-70, where that island nation's intensity of ideas, violent or otherwise, was given form.

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### ***Fidel con Hemingway*, 1960**

Oswaldo Salas

Ernest Hemingway and Fidel Castro meet for the only time at Marina Hemingway in Havana. Castro won the fishing tournament fair and square that day, or so the story goes. Even though the two men had not met before, it was said that they had a genuine respect for each other. Legend has it that Castro took a copy of Hemingway's classic *For Whom the Bell Tolls* with him into the Sierra Maestra mountains as he planned to march into Havana.



### ***Juego de Golf con Fidel*, 1959**

Alberto Korda

Cuba was once famous for its golf courses, before Castro had all but one of the “bastions of capitalist decadence” bulldozed. *El Jefe* didn't really hate the game itself, however, and he convinced Che Guevara to play a round with him just before the Country Club of Havana's course (one of Vice President Richard Nixon's favorites) was slated to be dismantled. Guevara knew his way around a course, having been a caddy as a boy back home in Argentina.

According to photographer Alberto Korda, Castro read in the *New York Times* that President Eisenhower had spent an entire day playing golf. He asked Guevara, “Why would the president of the United States take time out from the business of the country to play a game of golf? Why does he not spend his time on education or agriculture.”

The workaholic Cuban leaders had been spending a lot of time worrying over both topics in their own country and made a point of discussing them over the game. According to Korda, Che was the better golfer, but he let his notoriously competitive boss win the game.



This has been by far the best selling Cuban photograph at Southside Gallery, but the success has come with some risks. Following the December 1998 placement of an ad for the photograph in *Travel & Leisure* magazine, dozens of harassing phone calls, mostly from Miami, overwhelmed the gallery's tiny staff. "They say, 'how can you condone selling a photograph of murderers?'" gallery owner Milly Moorhead told the Commercial Appeal. Moorhead contacted police and the U.S. Marshal a week later when, after hours of receiving calls, a man told a gallery employee he would "come down there and take out your gallery!"

### ***Guerrillero Heroico*, 1960**

Alberto Korda

In February of 1960 a mid-day explosion in Havana Harbor literally sent shock waves across the city. The French freighter, *La Coubre*, loaded with weapons purchased in Belgium exploded, killing 136 crew and bystanders. Castro immediately accused the CIA of sabotage and coined the slogan "patria o muerte" echoing the Spanish-American war slogan, "remember the *Maine*," which was coined by America in answer to another mysterious Havana Harbor explosion 62 years earlier.

The following day, Castro led a mass public funeral from a balcony, flanked by other revolutionary leaders. During Castro's two-hour oratory, Guevara stood at the railing for only a few seconds, just long enough for Alberto Korda to click off two frames. The resulting image became what is believed to be the most reproduced photograph in history.

The photo was ignored by Korda's editor, so he hung it on the wall of his studio, where it remained for seven years until just before Guevara's death in Bolivia. Italian publisher Giacomo Feltrinelli, carrying a letter of introduction from the Cuban government, asked for a couple of prints. Korda complied, refusing payment, since the visitor was presented as "a friend of the revolution." Feltrinelli knew that Guevara was in mortal danger in Bolivia, and he moved quickly to obtain an image of him for publication in the event of his death. Korda received neither payment nor credit while Feltrinelli sold 2 million copies of the poster in half a year. Korda's position hasn't been helped by Cuba's refusal to sign the Berne Convention, an international copyright agreement. **M**

