



Phil Sugden and Carole Elchert are shown in Sugden's art studio in downtown Findlay, surrounded by photos taken while filming their “Activismo: Art & Dissidence in Cuba” documentary. (KEVIN BEAN / The Courier)

Findlay couple documents 'artivism' in Cuba

By SARA ARTHURS saraarthurs@thecourier.com Feb 18, 2022 9:00 AM

Directing a documentary about dissident artists in Cuba has led a Findlay couple to think about art — and about standing up against injustice — in new ways.

“Activismo: Art & Dissidence in Cuba” was directed by Philip Sugden and Carole Elchert. The 45-minute film, now being submitted to film festivals, is drawn from the couple’s 2015 trip to Havana, Cuba. There, they interviewed some of Cuba’s most prominent activist artists working for artistic freedom and social change, including Tania Bruguera, Jose Toirac and Jose Vincench. The production team interviewed Cuban artists living in the U.S. (photographer Geandy Pavon and multimedia artist Juan Si Gonzalez) and scholars of Cuban art (Elvis Fuentes and Rachel Weiss), according to a directors’ statement on the project website.

“The artists and scholars explained the historical relationship of Cuban history and politics with the activism and dissidence largely channeled through art today,” it states. “The soundtrack composed by Grammy nominee Tim Story reflects both the vibrancy of the Cuban culture and the tone of its courageous artists, who are notable for street performances and civic engagement in what they called ‘artivism.’”

Sugden described the documentary as a creative project “from the heart.” The couple are both educators and, Sugden said, have “underlying activism” in what they do. This includes Sugden’s visual art — he is a professor of art at Bluffton University — and Elchert’s writing and speaking. She is a professor of communications at the University of Findlay.

Sugden said he had been teaching about Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, which led him to learn more about Bruguera. This, in turn, led to the trip to Cuba. At first, Sugden said, “I was just going to hold my iPhone” and talk to Bruguera, but then they got in touch with videographers Jason Baker and Alex Goetz.

While meeting the various activists in Cuba, the couple tried not to attract attention. Elchert noted that Baker and Goetz were likely more conspicuous while she, carrying a still camera, “looked like a tourist.” “They’re active in their politics,” she said of the artists they met in Cuba. “They’re active in bringing their values to fruition, like justice.” Their work, she said, happens despite living in an authoritarian regime.

Elchert said artists in a repressive regime “learn the means to stay alive.” After meeting with Bruguera, the filmmakers asked her to go to lunch with them, but she declined. “And the reason is, she wanted to protect us,” Elchert said. She added that, these days, surveillance technology is “absolutely becoming an art form.”

In their eight-day trip, the team obtained 15 hours of video at cultural sites, in artists’ studios, and via artwork and historic interviews. The footage, combined with still photographs by Elchert and public domain images, was then edited to create a 45-minute film. In making the film, the couple would travel to Columbus, where Baker lives, and sit beside him as they put the film together, step by step.

Elchert said people may not realize what’s involved in making a film. First is “the time,” she said. Funding is also an issue. Bluffton University gave Sugden a grant as “seed money,” and donors in northwest Ohio and around the country have also contributed.

The film has been submitted to a long list of film festivals. The first to accept their submission was in Berlin, Germany. Elchert said they’ve received “some wonderful letters” from people at some of the festivals. “We’re pleased that people are reacting very positively to this,” she said. They were named “Best Feature Documentary” at the London International Art Film Festival in 2021. Sugden said he always felt that visual art was “a more intuitive language, and it speaks across borders.” But, he said, working with the artists in Cuba gave him new insights into how powerful that language can be.

“What I recognize in these artists is a kind of courage,” Elchert said. Working on the project, “I learned that I must not censor myself” in “a country that enables you to speak freely.” Not to talk about subjects like politics and religion “is not a choice,” she said. “It is a loss.”

The film is not yet being screened for the public, as Sugden and Elchert have been working to secure a distributor. They intend to someday host a private presentation for local donors.

Elchert said they hope their work helps “those beleaguered artists and citizens of Cuba ... in their struggle for freedom and justice.”

Sugden and Elchert previously created the film “White Lotus: An Introduction to Tibetan Culture.” More information is at www.floatingtempleproductions.com

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