

PRESS RELEASE

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**CUBAN ART SPACE EXHIBIT “THE ART OF MELLA”
21 Self-Taught Painters
February 10-March 26, 2011**

The community of Mella in the eastern province of Santiago de Cuba, population 36,000, is home to a remarkable group of painters, none of whom is a trained artist. Twenty-one of these painters will be shown at the Center for Cuban Studies' Art Space in Chelsea (231 West 29 Street) from February 10 through March 26.

The sugar industry is what drives the town economically and 60% of the population works in agriculture. Mella, then known as Bayate, was founded by Swedes in 1910 and this year the town is celebrating the centennial of its first sugar harvest. Mella consists of 30 small settlements, the most interesting being Thoson whose origin is Haitian and where traditional Haitian ceremonies and dances abound. The most practiced religion is Afro-Cuban, followed by Baptists and Catholics.

Out of this mix El Grupo Bayate was founded in 1994 by Luis Rodríguez Arias, a baker, and seven others, including his son, who signs his work “El Estudiante” (he considers his father “the teacher”). Included in the group are a policeman, a doctor, a driver, a sign painter, and a press photographer. The oldest, Richar Bruff Bruff (in his 80s) is of Jamaican heritage. Grupo Bayate grew to include 11 painters and a few years ago Luis, Jr. decided to form yet another group, of younger artists, Grupo Miranda. There are now 23 painters in the two groups.

Their painting is just one aspect of what this unique community of artists does: their love for Mella has led them to historical research and an investigation of everything about their community – culturally, socially and economically. They regularly work with 60 children, teaching them drawing, painting and theater as well as soccer. Their research into Mella's history and what they learn about their community from teaching the children informs their paintings as much as does the landscape and their own daily work.

As the Cubans say, the painters of Mella are “PRESENTE!”

Update, 2/8/11: One of the artists, Keiner Piedra, who painted this, died at 39 on Feb. 6, of complications from colon cancer.

