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JR in Chinatown

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Renowned French artist JR is participating in the XIII Biennial of Havana with his thought-provoking giant photographs.

From the balcony of his home, a boy watches the street. The photographer, alert for the apparently most insignificant signs of everyday life, presses the shutter button. This same boy, who carries Cuba's color on his skin, is resized by the artist and now his face appears on an enormous wall that separates a former movie theater in Havana's Barrio Chino from the community recreation center next door.

This is the contribution of the renowned French artist JR to the XIII Biennial of Havana, an effort sponsored by the embassy of his country in Cuba and the local headquarters of Galería Continua, which fits perfectly with the spirit of the event, and one of the key principles of Cuban cultural policy: democratize enjoyment of the highest aesthetic values.

JR's image is visible to all passers-by on Rayo Street for a month, in the heart of Chinatown. "I'm not interested in making art for a few, nor do I believe in art as a preserve for specialists, but as an opportunity for people to recognize and share feelings," JR told Granma.

In recent years he has established a strong relationship with Cuba. He participated in the XI Biennial, in a joint effort with Cuban-American creator José Parlá. Placed in several areas of the city - I particularly remember the San Miguel mural, between Aramburu and Soledad Streets, in the Cayo Hueso neighborhood - were gigantic photos, in black and white, of 25 elderly people,

which Parlá complemented with his particular way of graphically using facades and walls. The book **Los surcos de la ciudad** (Wrinkles of the City: Havana), emerged from the work, and was well received by critics.

JR later came to the Havana, last December, to present at the National Museum of Fine Arts the second screening on the island of the documentary **Rostros y lugares** (Faces and Places), which had been shown during the 39th International Festival of New Latin American Cinema. In this work he accompanied the famous French filmmaker Agnes Varda, recently deceased, traveling deep into the French countryside in search of stories of ordinary people.

Art for the street, if you like ephemeral but impressive, is JR's currency, which among us acquires a different meaning from that afforded in other places, he states, "Here the dialogue with the public is direct and does not compete with billboards advertising consumer products. The invitation is precisely to consume art, so that everyone who comes in contact with the child's photo, especially residents in Chinatown, becomes like him, contemplating with other eyes this part of the city where an especially popular atmosphere prevails."

JR goes from one end of the world to the other with a conception of art that privileges human understanding. When he wanted to picture women with the dignity they deserve, he portrayed them with an evident poetic charge that was concretized in the series **Woman are Heroes**. One of his projects of global reach was InsideOut, launched in 2011, in which he invited everyone interested to send him a picture of themselves, with a phrase about what the image represented. More than 260,000 women and men from 129 countries have been involved since then.

JR has not shied away from the world's most serious conflicts. As important as the Israeli-Palestinian orchestra of famous Argentine pianist and director Daniel Barenboim was Face2face, which he completed in 2007 on the Zionist occupied West Bank. Mixed feelings were unleashed by the images he brought to both sides of a wall erected by Israeli authorities: on an Israeli army watchtower in Tel Aviv he posted photos of Palestinians. On the facade of a building inhabited by Palestinians, he placed a giant photo of a Jew.

Trump and his xenophobic, anti-immigrant acolytes certainly did not like the monumental photo of Kikito, a one-year-old boy who lives in Tecate, just across the border from the United States. From the U.S. side it looks as if the child is about to jump.

Before traveling to Cuba for the XIII Havana Biennial, JR focused the attention of Parisians and tourists who constantly arrive to the French capital attracted by the artistic heritage it treasures. He camouflaged the iconic pyramid of the Louvre Museum with black and white images.

On one occasion, JR proclaimed: "Artists face the challenge of keeping their eyes open to the world and seeing things beyond what the media shows. I think the great walls are internal, and I like to knock them down by doing things that people think are impossible."