I grew up watching Soviet cartoons ("muñequitos rusos", as they were called), eating powdered Soviet milk and playing with matrioshkas. The first phrase that I learned in a foreign language, as a child, was Ruski yazik pa radio (Russian Language on Radio). My house, along with thousands of other Cuban houses, was filled with Soviet appliances, books printed in the Soviet Union and preserves prepared either in the USSR or another country from the Socialist Block. But my experience was not unique: it was the same sort of life that at least two generations, born and educated in Cuba between the sixties and the eighties, had experienced. I call these generations the “imagined sentimental Soviet–Cuban community”, integrated by Cubans who studied Russian language and literature, watched Soviet cartoons and movies, and in many cases, went to the Soviet Union to study.

With this exhibition, I try to stress how the presence of the Soviets and their products during more than 30 years in Cuba created this “sentimental community” with strong ties to Soviet culture and its references. The members of this group imagine themselves as part of an unsuccessful project to create “the new man” under Socialist precepts. Although they do not share the same political and ideological points of view, when they think about themselves they have to go back to the Soviet instruction experienced through their formal and sentimental education. They share a nostalgic view about their past even when this retrospective vision is not homogeneous. This sentimental community retains a common focal point: its childhood and its memories.

The objects shown in the pictures: buildings, cars, trucks, tractors, monuments, clocks, washer machines, and radios, are paralyzed in time. They are the eloquent footprint of a relationship that covered every single aspect of Cuban daily life between the sixties and the nineties, from an economic model, and an ideological orientation to the consumption of symbolic and tangible goods. They are also the sign of the passing of time: in most cases, they merely contain a nostalgic meaning. In other cases, they are still being used and function as a relic that has been decontextualized. They are the remnants of a world that does not exist anymore.

The exposure and consumption of certain cultural products, among them cartoons, allowed the formation of a Cuban identity marked by affection towards Soviet cultural forms. The prolonged contact with the Soviet experience brought about an aesthetic where the use of Soviet symbols is frequent: words in Russian, music, graphic arts, intertextualities as well as young Cubans with Russian names. This Soviet aesthetic finds its cultural expression through literature, cinematography, music, theatrical performances and even online sites.

The Soviet past of Cuba comes about in a cultural space where it is able to project one of the many readings that the Cuban present is experiencing: that related to the Soviet period of Cuba. This is not an ideological nostalgia; it is, however, a nostalgia paramount to the mourning of the end of a world. The end of this world, finally, has allowed the birth of multiple, unstable and personal worlds, one of them intrinsically related to the Soviet era in Cuba.

This photographic experiment originated when I was doing research for my book Escrito en cirílico. El ideal soviético en la producción cultural cubana pos–noventa (Written in Cyrillic. The Soviet ideal in the Cuban cultural production post-nineties) which will be published by Cuarto Propio Publishing House this year –2012–. Suddenly, I was in front of all these objects, appliances, equipments, and means of transportation that were once part of our daily life. All of them started speaking by themselves, making sense of a Cuban identity that I perceive in transition; an identity labeled by the exceptional circumstance of having been a “tropical island with a Soviet flavor”.

“Cuba Today: A Soviet Inventory”:
The Soviet Legacy in Cuba through 30 Photographs
Damaris Puñales–Alpízar