



Visitors walk past Chinese artist Shen Shaomin's Mao.



A woman takes photos of Chinese artist Shen Shaomin's Ho Chi Minh.

DEAD DICTATORS DRAW HONG KONG ART CROWDS

A "breathing" Fidel Castro is among several ex-communist leaders gathered in Hong Kong this week—one of the world's centers of capitalism—as part of a cheeky exhibition at Art Basel. Lifelike replicas of Mao Zedong, Vladimir Lenin, Kim Il-Sung, Ho Chi Minh and the former Cuban leader are lying in state in the city's harbor front convention centre, drawing curious, smartphone-snapping art enthusiasts.

Made from acrylic and silica gel and dressed in their signature uniforms, all lie in glass coffins, except for Castro, who can be seen "breathing" almost imperceptibly on his deathbed. The installation, called "Summit", was created by Chinese artist Shen Shaomin who said the work was conceived as a response to the global financial crisis of 2008.

It was originally commissioned for the Sydney Biennale contemporary art festival in 2010 — when Castro was still alive—as an imaginary meeting of former dictators to parody the now defunct G8 grouping of wealthy industrialized nations. "Many Western scholars have become suspicious about capitalism, and compared and discussed theories of communism, so I have created the 'G5'," Shen told AFP at the Hong Kong fair. "People from different countries, different cultural backgrounds, different experiences have their own ways to interpret it," said Shen,



In this picture taken on March 22, 2017, visitors sit behind Chinese artist Shen Shaomin's Fidel Castro, part of his 'Summit' project, at Art Basel in Hong Kong. — AFP photos

who jokingly inserted his iPhone into Castro's hand. Gallerist Agnes Lin, who is representing the work at Art Basel, said she

had been doubtful whether the exhibit would be allowed into semi-autonomous Hong Kong, where concerns are growing that China is tightening its grip.

Mao remains a controversial figure on the mainland and there is general sensitivity about his image there. Despite that, Mao's replica and the other bodies were made in Beijing, where Shen has a base. "(Art Basel) really fought hard to have this piece in," Lin said. "I think Hong Kong is still free... we can still have the freedom to show this work and I'm so happy about that." Shen said the bodies took a team of seven to eight artisans six months to create after intensively studying the leaders' appearances, from their moles to their hair.

"It makes people want to learn more about them," said Tiernan Breen, 18, a student from Fiji browsing Art Basel. "You ask yourself questions which you wouldn't ask if you hadn't actually seen them."

Shen is not expecting a private collector to take home the bodies, but hopes the work finds a place in a museum. Since the Sydney Biennale, the installation has toured museums in Singapore and France. "It's very unique, I love it... You get goosebumps, you know?" said Nesli Vetter, 54, visiting Art Basel from Germany. "All good old boys." — AFP

As US takes aim at immigration, musicians feel the pinch

Before he staged a professional comeback last week, the rapper Kayem had disappeared from public life for two years. A US citizen by birth who remembers his relatives' suffering at the hands of Moamer Kadhafi's regime in Libya, he was lying low on legal advice after the US authorities crippled his career by putting him on a no-fly list. He blames profiling for the scrutiny he receives at airports.

"I've been on lockdown," the rapper who used to go by Khaled M.-said at South by Southwest, the pre-eminent global media and cultural festival in Texas where he made his reappearance. After initially planning to wait until summer, he changed his mind after President Donald Trump issued a ban on travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries in January, raising fears of future travel headaches.

Although courts subsequently suspended the ban—along with a second revised version this month—the new culture under the Trump administration is seriously complicating many travelers' lives. At least eight foreign performers were turned away attempting to travel to the United States for South by Southwest. And among those artists who were able to play, worries are growing about how tougher immigration rules will affect their careers and the music world more broadly.

Inconsistencies on border

Despite the suspension of Trump's travel bans, the president has vowed to ramp up

enforcement of existing rules. "One of the major problems with the ban is that even if it's stayed, it's very difficult to consider working with artists from those countries," said Matthew Covey, an immigration lawyer who produced a South by Southwest showcase, ContraBanned, featuring musicians with ties to countries on Trump's list. "It isolates those nations," he said. "So the question is, 'How do we counteract the narrative that we are receiving about the Muslim-majority countries?'"

Covey is executive director of Tamizdat, a non-profit cultural support organization that set up a free hotline in 2015 for artists encountering problems at the US border. He described an especially stubborn customs officer about whom Tamizdat documented six cases: "Five-foot-six (1.7 meters), moustache, bald, didn't like DJs, didn't think they were real artists." Customs officers at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport are more friendly to foreign artists, reflecting the kind of crossing-by-crossing, officer-by-officer unpredictability foreign artists can run into at the border, Covey said.

Handcuffed at airport

Another group on its way to South by Southwest, the Italian post-punk band Soviet Soviet, said its three members were handcuffed and detained overnight with common criminals after being refused entry at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. It's not clear to what extent Trump has affected such decisions. The



US-born Libyan-American rapper Khaled Ahmed, better known as Kayem, poses ahead of his live performance at the ContraBanned: MusicUnites South by Southwest (SXSW) music showcase at The Palm Door on Sixth on March 17, 2017 in Austin. — AFP

United States requires visas for performers on tour—even if they come from visa-exempt countries—but has traditionally made exceptions for appearances at showcases such as South by Southwest.

Cherine Amr, lead singer of the Egyptian-Canadian metal band Massive Scar Era, which was turned away at the border, said being

denied access to US events represents a massive impediment for artists. "Any musician here knows that in order to make it in the music business—especially for the metal scene—you have to make it in US," she wrote on Facebook. The festival itself was not immune from criticism. South by Southwest's artist contract said festival officials would potentially work to deport those found violating visas it sponsored.

Some artists criticize the clause in an open letter for being tone-deaf to the political moment at best. "In light of recent attacks on immigrant communities, this practice is particularly chilling," they said. South by Southwest said it has never assisted in the deportation of any artist and would review its artist contract for 2018.

Diminishing boundaries

Artists say music provides emotional connections with people who might not otherwise be exposed to foreign cultures—especially under the current climate. Dena El Saffar, who was born in the United States and explores her Iraqi heritage through music, says it provides a way to "diminish boundaries between people and cultures." For rapper Emmanuel Jal, a former child soldier from South Sudan—which is not affected by Trump's travel ban—music helps "represent the voices of those people who are not getting heard." "My country's still at war. People are still dying, kids are in refugee camps," he said. "If I run away from representing their voice, I run away from a responsibility." — AFP