INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

With a wink, Felix Gonzalez-Torres slips into Venice

By Randy Kennedy
Wednesday, June 6, 2007

VENICE: The artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who died of AIDS in 1996 at the age of 38, did not exactly cut the figure of a secret agent, an infiltrator foiling lines of defense. He was a generous man with a handsome, cherubic face and a wicked sense of humor. He loved cats. And some of his best-known art is made of candy, mounds of it, free for the taking and endlessly replenished, a Willy Wonka vision of post-minimalism.

But Gonzalez-Torres also firmly believed that all art was political, whether it intended to be or not. He knew that his was, and he believed that for it to be effective, it should not preach or proselytize or even show its hand too fully. "The most successful of all political moves," he once said,"are ones that don't appear to be 'political.'" Such a strategy could be called subversive. Another way to describe it is to say that it worked on many levels: candy as candy; as art object; as a questioning of art objects; as a metaphor for mortality and depletion in the age of AIDS; as a means for his art and ideas literally to be spread, like a virus - or maybe like joy - by everyone who took a piece.

Whichever way the work is seen, the fact that it will be exhibited here beginning Sunday as the United States' official representative at this year's Venice Biennale undoubtedly would have been considered a huge victory by Gonzalez-Torres, the kind of slipping past the gatekeepers that he delighted in. And because his work often dealt squarely with the reality of death, including his own, he might have been pleased that he managed to pull off such a coup without even being around, people who knew him say. (He is only the second artist to represent the United States posthumously in the Biennale in its modern history; the work of Robert Smithson was chosen for the 1982 exhibition, nine years after his death.)

"I was shocked that he was chosen, frankly," said Nancy Spector, chief curator of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, whose proposal for an exhibition of his work was selected last year in an open competition by a committee of curators, museum directors and artists that advises the U.S. State Department.

Gonzalez-Torres, who was born in Cuba and raised in Puerto Rico before moving to New York, had a complicated but unabashed love of America and of the ideals it represented. His work was often a way to express his bitter disappointment when he felt that the country was failing those ideals, during the early days of AIDS, the Gulf War and the administrations of Ronald Reagan and former President George Bush, a time when he feared that civil liberties and other democratic protections were eroding.

Spector, who curated the exhibition at the Palladian-style United States pavilion here, said that she chose Gonzalez-Torres as her candidate for the Biennale in part because his work has become even more influential since his death, inspiring many prominent young artists like Pierre Huyghe, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Tino Sehgal.

But she said she also thinks that Gonzalez-Torres probably would have considered his art to be even more relevant politically now than when he made it, with the war in Iraq and domestic battles raging over government eavesdropping, gay marriage and the concentration of wealth in America.

"I feel pretty confident that he would have felt this was the right time and the right place," she said, "because it would have signaled that notion of both total infiltration and of really arriving at the center and being able to speak the narrative that he wanted to."

Gonzalez-Torres made the short list for the 1995 Biennale, held just a year before his death, and at that time, even as he was becoming increasingly more ill, he spoke of wanting the work in the exhibition to be "tough." The work that Spector has chosen includes many of his greatest hits - a candy spill; his cube-like stacks of paper, also free for the taking and replenished to an ideal height; his cascading strings of 15-watt frosted light bulbs that can be arranged however the curator sees fit.

But many of the pieces in the show are also tough, among his most stridently polemical. One paper stack, with blank pieces edged in black like funeral announcements, is called "Untitled" (Republican Years), from 1992. Two other stacks, from 1989, bear the typed words "Memorial Day Weekend" and "Veterans Day Sale." (Gonzalez-Torres, who thought of such stacks as anti-monuments, said he came up with the idea for the two phrases after reading the paper and thinking "that in our culture we no longer celebrate historical events at the public plaza -we go shopping.") While some of his signature spills and piles are composed of silver-wrapped chocolates or brightly colored hard candy, the carpet-like one that covers the floor in one wing of the American pavilion, called "Untitled" (Public Opinion), is made with grayish licorice pieces vaguely shaped like missiles.

The largest work in the exhibition, one that was conceived by Gonzalez-Torres during his lifetime but never made, does not appear to have political overtones at all. Commanding the courtyard in front of the pavilion, it is two shallow circular reflecting pools, touching to form a figure eight. The pools, weighing 8 to 10 tons each, are made of two solid pieces of Carrara marble, the same kind Michelangelo used (and they are the largest pieces taken intact from their particular quarry in northern Tuscany since 1523, according to the exhibition's stone supplier.)

The pools arrived at the pavilion only on Monday, caught up in some characteristically Italian-style traffic and paperwork problems. "We were starting to get pretty worried," Spector said. As she and assistants made the last adjustments to the exhibition on Tuesday, the pools were filled and the water almost spilling over their edges caught the sunlight as yellow flowers from a linden tree floated down onto the surface.

But the pools are more than simply beautiful, echoing other doubled objects that Gonzalez-Torres made as expressions of homosexual affinity and togetherness, like a pair of round mirrors or a pair of synchronized clocks, also touching, called "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers). He said that he thought such works were more powerful because they refused to engage critics by playing on their terms.

Of course, many of the art pilgrims and tourists who file past the pools from now until November, when the Biennale ends, will probably not think of sex or politics once when seeing them. "They're beautiful and I think people will probably throw coins in them, or might actually get into them if it's hot," Spector said, smiling. "I wouldn't mind."