

## A Place in the World

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**ROBERT HUFF RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBIT SPANS 47 YEARS**



[H R 6-12, 2012, pencil, acrylic, oriented strand board.](#)

In August 2014, the artist Robert Huff passed away from cancer. He was just 69, and his death was mourned by all he influenced throughout his prolific decades as a sculptor, painter, and draftsman -- and as a professor at Miami-Dade Community College, now known as Miami-Dade College.

Huff was an innovator, one of the early artists whose work helped put Miami on the global map. So it's an appropriate tribute that Miami-Dade College's flagship museum, the MDC Museum of Art + Design, now housed in the Freedom Tower downtown, is hosting a retrospective of his work, titled "Robert Huff: 47 Years."

Huff, a native of Michigan who moved to the Tampa area as a teen, was always known for his down-to-earth persona, which was reflected in his artwork -- never pretentious, never overtly glamorous.

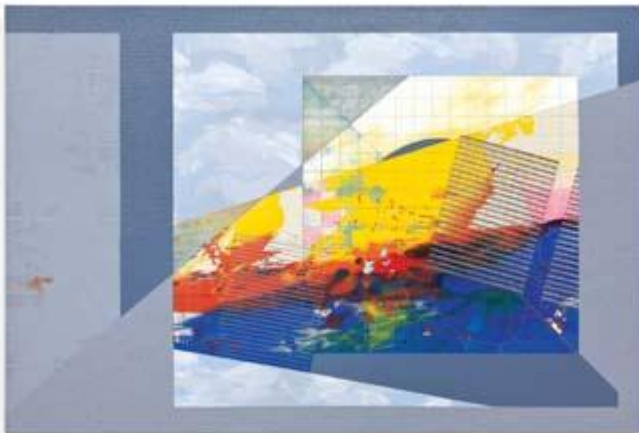
On that level, he was far away from the glitz and the glam that is Miami's trademark. But looking at his body of work now, when global climate change will have a greater impact on our neighborhood than in almost any other place in the world, Huff's work and vision fit right in.

That's part of what will be revealed in this exhibit.

Huff always had a close relationship with his environment. With his immediate environment -- in his workshop, where he fastidiously plied wood and metal, turning the material into his subtle and magnificent sculptures; with the students he would teach at Miami campuses; and with the broader ecological environment, observing the beauty and the precarious future of such landscapes as the Everglades and the mountains of Appalachia.

Huff wasn't a self-taught artist, but his art felt free of academic constraints or fashionable trends. They are works that grew out of something more organic.

His wife and partner in art for more than 30 years, Barbara Young -- long involved in the cultural arts scene, including as art librarian at the Miami-Dade Public Library -- considers her husband both an affable arts facilitator and someone dedicated to the mastery of craft.



[Miami Windows / Miami, 1982, pencil, acrylic on canvas.](#)

She met Huff when she was starting up the public library's Artmobile in 1976, a van that would bring art to the people. "He was very helpful in encouraging faculty and student visits, and he loaned work for some of the Artmobile exhibitions," she recalls of their first encounters. "He was very professional and dependable, but in an easygoing way. He had a wonderful sense of humor and very quick wit."

Later she would come to appreciate the multiple layers and scope of his practice. Early on, she says, "you can see blues and reflected water lights, colors that are Florida." He left no detail unexamined when studying his surroundings.

"On a boat ride with him in the Everglades," she says, "he could tell you about the tides, what fish might be biting and where, what bait to use. He could tell you what trees you were seeing, what currents to look out for, where to anchor for the night to avoid mosquitoes, the names of birds."

He was equally observant in his travels. "He went to Russia as part of an artist exchange at the time of Glasnost [the initial opening with the Soviet Union in the late 1980s]," she continues. "And he saw churches that were being refurbished with their domes gold-leafed. He came back and began to work with reds, which the Soviets knew how to use as a great power color, and gold leaf. That experience resulted in a number of icon-like pieces."

In 2001, Huff and Young bought an old campground in the Appalachian mountains of southwest Virginia, and his art soon reflected this environment, as well. Not only were there extreme seasonal changes, which included multitudes of colors, but he became fascinated with the strip-mining that was devastating and pock-marking the landscape.



[Crossfire #4, 1999, acrylic, pencil, gold leaf, canvas, aluminum.](#)

"I would say that his art is a good reflection of who he was and what it stood for as a man," says Carol Jazzar, who exhibited Huff's work several times in her independent art gallery in Miami, and who is the curator of the current MDC show. "He was quiet, but was a keen observer of his environment. Hence the subject of the overall body of his work -- the [mix of] architecture and landscape, and the relationship of the two."

After graduating with an MFA from the University of South Florida, Huff started teaching at Miami-Dade Community College's Kendall campus in

1968, becoming chair of the art department. His students would include such well-known artists as Robert Chambers and Luis Gispert.

But his own work is also a trajectory of art life in Miami. For instance, some of the earlier drawings and acrylics, Young points out, have a pronounced Miami reference in their pastels and Florida coloring, and will be part of the exhibit.

Long before Wynwood grew into an art center, there was a clustering of galleries in Bay Harbor Islands in the 1980s, and Huff showed at places like the Gloria Luria Gallery. And as early as 1973 he was part of "33 Miami Artists," a group show at Downtown Gallery, New Orleans. His art is now in collections and museums.



Robert Huff in his studio, 1986. Photo by Richard Lee Williams

In some later pieces, he worked with woods and metals, which could take over rooms and walls, but never felt heavy. He translated that aesthetic to paintings as well, where the idea of balance and tension in both man's and nature's architecture seemed like a guiding principle. The image of a gutted mine with bright colors above suggested a beauty and a tragedy.

Examples of all of this will make up museum's exhibit.

According to curator Jazzar, this retrospective of Huff's work was in the making even before his death. She approached him about the idea, and "he immediately followed through by archiving methodically all his works, which spanned 47 years!"

"I'd known Robert a few years but was still not familiar with his older works," she says. "I was eager to see more, to look at the early pieces and discover his pivotal moments with key pieces, when one creative breakthrough leads to a new direction. This is the beauty of a retrospective."

Asked about what Robert Huff would want people to take away from this survey, Barbara Young says she can only guess: "Maybe that the work would pose some questions for viewers, perhaps a greater appreciation of the beauty and complexity of the world around us. And the temporary nature and fragility of it all."

"Robert Huff: 47 Years" runs from September 3 through November 8 at the MDC Museum of Art + Design (MOAD), Freedom Tower, 600 Biscayne Blvd., Miami; [www.mdc.moad.org](http://www.mdc.moad.org).

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