

## Art journeys through the decaying worlds of Miami and Cuba

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“Stella” by Florencio Gelabert. Photo by Alejandro Taquechel

Two terrific exhibits at Miami Dade College’s Museum of Art + Design (MOAD) in the Freedom Tower guide us through various stages of building and decay, from room to sprawling room. While Florencio Gelabert and Michael Vasquez work in very different media – Gelabert is a sculptor and Vasquez a painter – they work thematically together here, drawing us into their unique, crumbling worlds.

It has to be noted that the huge, sometimes awkward main galleries are often hard to work within. It’s not that the renovated second floor of the 1925 iconic pink tower is ugly – it’s beautiful, with gleaming floors and columns. But for showing art, it can be difficult, as the massive space can overwhelm the artworks.

Which is why sculpture, particularly large-scale, *does* work well here, and why Gelabert’s pieces fit like a glove, occupying the center spaces.



“The Site” by Florencio Gelabert. Photo by Alejandro Taquechel

The best example is the singular sculpture in the biggest space, the introduction to “Journeys: A Dialogue With Time.” It’s a beautiful, mournful forest of burnt tree trunks, made from foot-high wooden stumps in various forms. They could be the remnants of a swamp after a fire, but they also have an anthropomorphic look. The room is dim, and the lighting casts magical, sparkling reflections across the polished floors, columns and ceiling. Each stump is set on a mirrored Plaxiglas square, so the installation resembles a giant chess board as well.

We can start to see elements of Gelabert’s style, craft and conceptual underpinnings with this central work, “Stella.” The Cuba-born artist left the island in the early 1990s, during what would be known as an exodus of the “’90s Generation” of artists, which also included José Bedia, Glexis Novoa and a group of other artists who would transform Miami’s art scene. But they never left Cuba behind in their art.

“Stella” is rooted in Cuba, specifically in a MesoAmerican burial site that Gelabert first made a model of back in Cuba in the 1980s. He updated that model for the Freedom Tower, and a version of it is also currently in the Havana Biennial.

Gelabert uses materials associated with construction – cement, wood, bricks – to create sculptures that are in a state of deconstruction, or destruction, like his former homeland. Sometimes it is of an environment, like the forest installation, but more often of crumbling buildings, as you see moving through the exhibit.



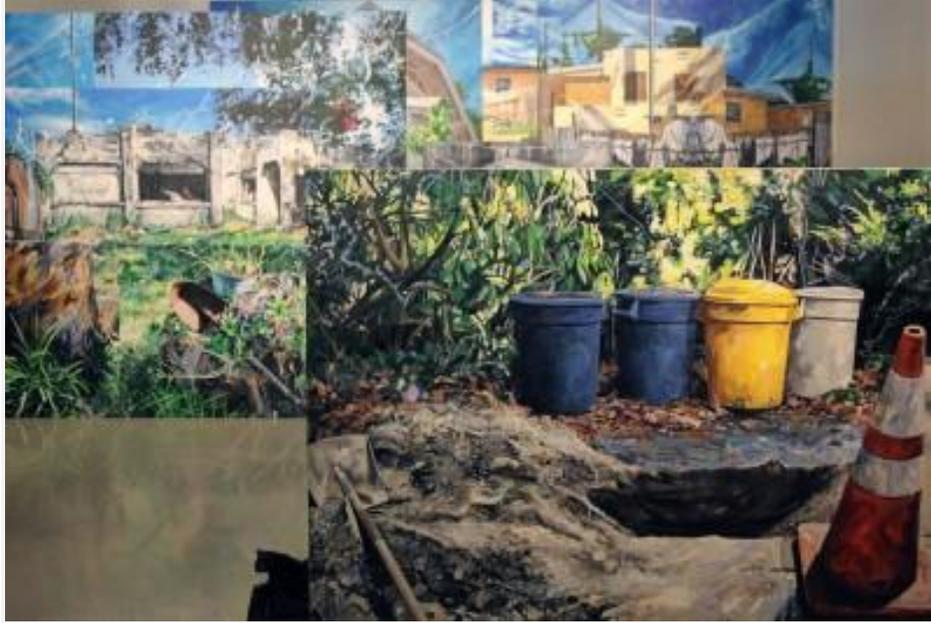
“The Rest” by Florencio Gelabert. Photo by Alejandro Taquechel

One sculpture, “The Site,” consists of the smudged, white-washed remains of a wall, with a leafless, dying tree sprouting from it, and dirty water running out into a rusty metal drum. It is surrounded by debris.

A heart-breakingly lovely piece occupies its own, darkened space, its black burnt tree trunks set up on a white table with underlighting – it’s like a mausoleum. Titled “The Rest,” those trunks are actually made from Styrofoam; nature has completely died and been replaced.

There are few sculptures here given the large space, but they fill it by leading us through the subtle and moving journey that Gelabert has created. The melancholy atmosphere is related to the disintegrating scaffolding of a lost homeland, and to personal grief as well, according to the artist. Originally conceived as somewhat of a retrospective, after the recent deaths of his brother and mother, Gelabert wanted to create a new body of work that reflected this intimate relationship with loss.

It’s hard not to think about the physical location of these latest works: in a building that once was a processing center for tens of thousands of Cuban refugees, which looks out at Biscayne Bay and, 90 miles on, Cuba.



Installation by Michael Vasquez, “Neighborhood Reclamation.”

Michael Vasquez’s works face the other direction, towards the inner city neighborhoods of Miami where he grew up. He is rightly considered one of our best painters. The New World School of the Arts grad made a splash almost immediately, with his brash brush strokes and color bringing to life the street gang friends from his hood in portraiture on large canvases.

More recently, Vasquez has been making sculptural paintings, as is the case at MOAD with “Neighborhood Reclamation.” His large canvases are still there, but instead of hung on walls they are set up on the floor – and this time, without any human portraiture. In fact, walking around Vasquez’s painting installation is not unlike Gelabert’s journey, as we discover decrepit houses, abandoned yards overrun with weeds and junk, a world falling apart. But this time, the world is only a mile away.

And we literally do walk through this neighborhood. The paintings are propped up by two-by-fours and filled black garbage bags, and staggered across the gallery space; we weave through them. Here, too, are images of exposed brick behind a peeling wall, collapsed roofs, trash cans, discarded potted plants and an amazing checkerboard table covered in vines.



### Observing Vasquez's "Neighborhood."

When looking at the installation as a whole at the entrance to this "Neighborhood," you see a jumble of imagery and coloring. But after entering, you walk around each piece, dissecting the paintings individually.

The paintings are superb. The tremendous detail draws you directly into these houses and lots, peering closely through the fence or a crumbling wall at a forsaken landscape. But Vasquez's bold and bright coloring softens the decrepitude. Maybe life will return again. Like Gelabert's work, there is an awe-inspiring beauty in the art.

Credit should be given to executive director and chief curator Jeremy Mikolajczak for revitalizing this once moribund building as well. For years it stood virtually empty, and was inconsistent when it re-opened under Miami-Dade College with an art gallery. He's brought stability and energy to the exhibits, and has admirably highlighted Miami art in the rejuvenated heart of the city.

*"Neighborhood Reclamation from Michael Vasquez" runs through July 12, and "Journeys: A Dialogue With Time: Recent Works by Florencio Gelabert" runs through Aug. 16, at the MDC Museum of Art + Design, Freedom Tower at Miami Dade College, 600 Biscayne Blvd. (second floor), Miami; 305-237-7700  305-237-7700; [www.mdcmoad.org](http://www.mdcmoad.org).*