

An exhibition explores downtown Miami history through art and words

By Anne Tschida Special to the Miami Herald

Downtown Miami: The Ground Beneath Our Feet, An Artists' and Writers' Collaboration is a hybrid of an exhibit. It's about art, literature, Miami architecture and history, and all about collaboration — a collaboration between artists and writers on one level, and between the community and efforts at preservation on a broader one.

The Ground Beneath Our Feet is perfectly placed in a space in Miami Dade College Museum of Art + Design (MOAD) in the Freedom Tower, with windows overlooking a downtown skyline that is changing at warp speed, overwhelming its earliest architecture.

Artist Lea Nickless organized the 'Ground Beneath Our Feet' exhibition with Rosemarie Chiarlone at the Museum of Art + Design. | Anna Barten

Hanging on the walls are works of art from 24 locals, each of the dozen pieces a coupling of a writer and a visual artist, and each one addressing an aspect of unique architecture or historically important sites. They are actually prints, as the original pieces — some of them very tactile in their materials — make up a one-of-a-kind art book, which sits on a table in the middle of the gallery.

The timing of the exhibit couldn't be better. As was punctuated by the ceremony for the Pritzker Architecture Prize, the most esteemed award in that field in the world (held in Miami for the first time in May), the city is arriving as a center for contemporary architecture. But it is also a city notorious for neglect of structures from its past.

Those would include the D.A. Dorsey House, built in 1913 by one of the area's first prominent black businessmen in Overtown, placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989. Sadly, despite some renovation attempts, the house remains in bad shape, shuttered up and closed to the public.

Artist Ernesto Oroza, who has done some fascinating cultural-art "interventions" in places such as the Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, decided to document the storied building even if he couldn't get inside. He posed a black woman dressed in a turn-of-the-20th-century outfit gazing through the gates, sitting in the property's decay, and created a photo collage. He collaborated with Cuban writer Luis Eligio D Omni, whose Spanish-language poems accompany each image, titled *Hear the Voice of the Dorsey House*. It is a mournful piece.

While Oroza's is a black-and-white montage, the Scottish Rite Temple painting is bathed in a seductive yellow. Another historic building opened in 1924 along the Miami River, the Temple is in better shape and has one of Miami's most distinctive facades, with its four eagles glaring from the roof and Greek-style architecture.

Artist Onajide Shabaka is known for his environmentally inspired drawing, photography and sculpture, often a simple flower or tree; this is a lush, figurative painting of the building. He collaborated with Adrian Castro, a well-known performative poet who threads Afro-Caribbean religious themes into his writing.



Yellow also dominates the pencil-and-oil *Old Plantation Slave Quarters* piece from artist Gary Moore and writer Nadege Green. The quarters were transplanted to Lummus Park, near the Scottish Temple, but in this painting the imagery is more abstract and mystical. Moore has drawn a female slave, mirrored by an upside-down man below her, surrounded by floating eyes. Part of Green's text reads: "Tell me something why you care about this place? A place that's been here long before you was born? Keeping it around all this time when you got all these tall buildings put together by them machines."

"I really hope ya'll appreciate this old slave quarters and the hands that put it all together. I guess if you ain't forgettin bout this house, you ain't forgettin about us either."

The most obvious symbol of a place's past is its cemeteries, and Lea Nickless and Andrea Gollin recreated a detail of one, a slice of the City of Miami Cemetery. Made from a dyed cotton sheet with elements gathered at the site by Nickless, the piece features phrases from tombstones that Gollin picked out to accompany the visual. In one small cut in the cotton, the engraving reads: "A loving husband and devoted father. Ship's Cook. We shall meet on that beautiful shore."

In fact, the complete texts the writers penned rarely made it onto the artwork, explains Nickless, who organized the exhibit along with another artist included in the project, Rosemarie Chiarlone. The entire texts are printed in another mini-book, set in a pouch in the back page of the main artist book.

Nickless is part of the Word + Image Lab (WAIL), founded in 2009 to promote cross-disciplinary interaction in a sometimes fractured arts world. The group produced several art-writer events and then began a partnership with MOAD, which gives it space for a number of shows.

Still, WAIL is a DIY project, according to Nickless. The group raises its own funding and curates these exhibits independently. For *Ground*, she got The Villagers Inc., a historic preservation organization, to provide underwriting. The WAIL projects should be seen as an open-ended conversation, not one-off exhibits, she says, building on each other to bring varied artists together and continue promoting a wider awareness of conservation.

For *Ground*, Nickless says, WAIL asked 12 artists to choose a writer to work with. Some had worked together for a long time, others were first-time collaborations. But the final results were all created within the last six months.

Sharing the originals, Nickless carefully turned the pages of the delicate book, the focal point of this exhibit, as though it too were a relic.

The 12 pages of double spreads start with a map dotted with drawings of marine and swamp life, made from archival ink-jet print, watercolor and beeswax, and incorporating a good amount of text. The map is of the first excavated archaeological site in South Florida, the Miami Circle — showcased in this project as a collaboration between another artist instrumental in the founding of WAIL, Tom Virgin, and award-winning poet and Miami Dade College professor Michael Hettich. When looking through and gently touching the pages, you can see why the prints hanging on the walls don't quite do the originals justice.

The rest of the downtown sites explored here are the Brickell Mausoleum, the Alfred I. Dupont Building, the Huntington Building, the Olympia Theater, the First Federal Courthouse, the U.S. Post Office and Courthouse, and the Freedom Tower itself. Among the artists are Felice Grodin and Michelle Weinberg. Writers include novelist John Dufresne.

The Freedom Tower book representation is a joint creation by Chiarlone and her long-time collaborator, writer Susan Weiner. The 1925 pink icon is a symbol of Cuban Miami, its classical Mediterranean Revival-style architecture still able to stand out amid the looming glass high-rises that surround it. But Chiarlone and Weiner have stripped out the tropical color, leaving an image — in graphite and hand-cut paper — that details the Tower's incredible design and text that highlights its metaphorical place as a beacon of hope for refugees who have also become part of Miami's historical landscape.

If you go

What: "Downtown Miami: The Ground Beneath Our Feet, An Artists' and Writers' Collaboration"

Where: Miami Dade College Museum of Art + Design at the Freedom Tower, 300 NE Second Ave., Second Floor., Miami.

When: Noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday (open until 8 p.m. third Saturday of each month), through Aug. 16.

Cost: Free.

Information: 305-237-7700, museum@mdc.edu or www.mdcmod.org.