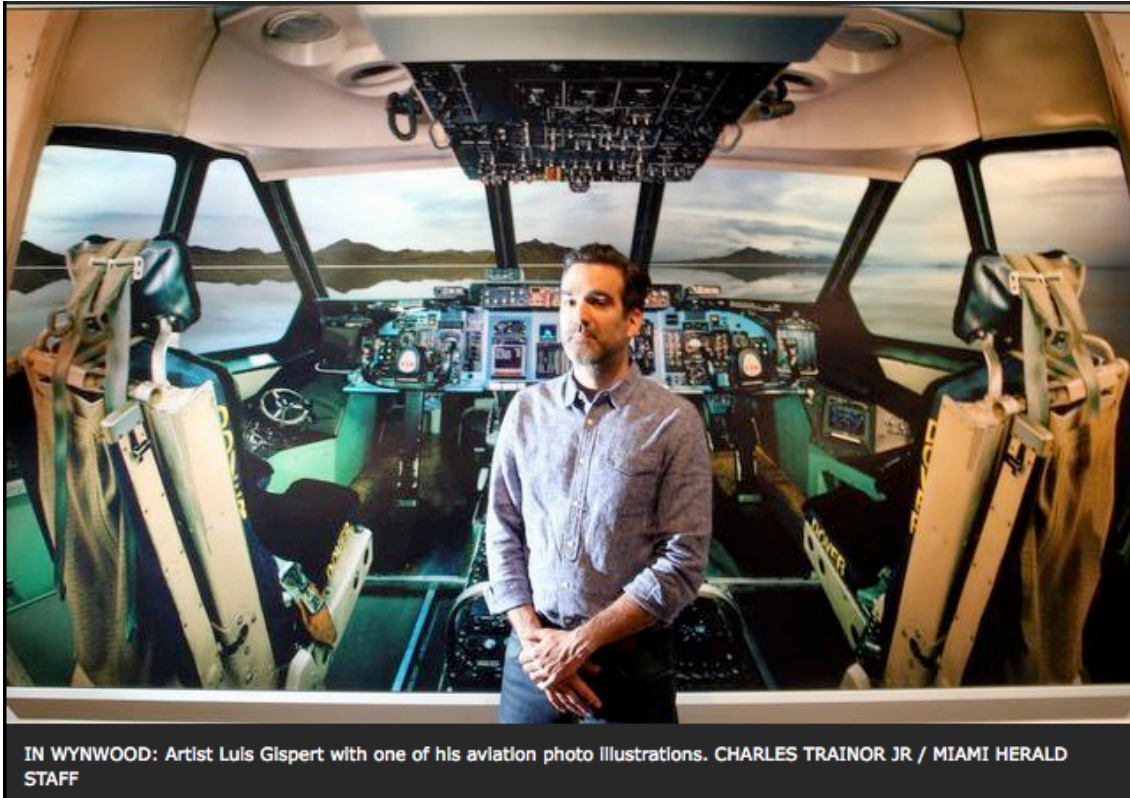


## Lunch with Lydia: Artist Luis Gispert

March 9, 2014



The cockpits of the old military airplanes photographed by Miami-raised artist Luis Gispert seem haunted, barely a trace of the pilots who once inhabited them, no hints to the battles in which they may have engaged during World War II and the Cold War era.

But the planes seem charged with life in large-scale, graphically rich C-print images that sweep the breadth of elaborate instrument panels — endless levers, switches, gauges, buttons — and showcase sumptuous, surreally imposed landscapes framed by the planes' windshields.

“Tender Game,” on view at Wynwood’s David Castillo Gallery through March 29, offers a vision of the Swiss Alps through the cockpit of a Douglas C-125 cargo plane nicknamed Old Shaky; South Dakota’s Badlands, placid and bathed in pastel light, comes into focus through a turboprop Lockheed C-130 Hercules; a purplish gorge in Montana seems more like stained glass through the altered, cathedral-like windshield of a B-25 bomber.

Gispert drove off-road and hiked to high rocks, just a backpack full of film, a clunky retro camera and a tripod as gear, in search of landscapes that he later digitally melded with images of the grounded warcraft he found in museums and airplane graveyards around the country, and which he also shot using his ancient equipment.

“Part of it for me was the experience of photographing the landscapes the way it was done 100 years ago,” says the Brooklyn-based Gispert, 41, part of a group of Miami artists who came of age in the mid-to-late 1990s and have risen to national success. Gispert has an MFA from Yale and is in the permanent collection of the Guggenheim and Whitney museums in New York, the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco and the Fogg Museum at Harvard University, among others.

“There’s so much to the setup, the adjustments, the focusing. You have to use a level, you have to have a hood over your head, you see the image upside down,” he says. “I guess I’m suspicious of anything that comes too easily. When you have to schlep all of that equipment on a hike, when you have to take 45 minutes to set up a frame, when you’re not shooting off a hundred frames but maybe 10 because you’re using expensive, hard-to-find film, when you have to be patient while you wait for that magic light — there’s no way you don’t think about that image differently than you might if you’re using a digital camera.”

The images of the airplanes and landscapes are shot on film, then digitized and fused together on a computer and finally developed the old-school way.

“The reason I go through this process is that the images that I get this way are the sharpest possible. Some of the prints are pretty much life-size. I want you to feel like you’re there. I want you to be able to read all the fine print on the instrument panel.”

Stay with the images long enough and you’ll find bits of proof that indeed these planes roared with life once upon a time. “You can see the scratches, tiny dents, the constant use. Most of them have a thick layer of nicotine residue because so many of the pilots chain-smoked while they were flying their missions,” he says.

The airplane series is an extension of previous, acclaimed photography by Gispert that elevated pimped-out, lowrider culture. The work made keen observations about the baroque inherent in cars that had been painstakingly refitted with wall-to-wall Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Chanel interiors. (The cars had landscapes framed by their windshields, making a connection with the airplane series.) It is knock-off ornateness, but it nonetheless set back the owners more than the price of the cars themselves.

Gispert, who was born in New Jersey to Cuban parents, long had a fascination with pop culture, consumerism, hip-hop and the iconography of the street. But it wasn’t until he started taking art classes at Miami Dade College, later graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and then getting his MFA in sculpture, that he started thinking more deeply about the artistic value and the transcendent messages behind Miami-style bling — behind boom boxes, tricked-out rides, throbbing sound systems and the youth culture’s obsession with designer labels.

“Growing up I was never really a part of that kind of street culture,” Gispert says over lunch at Joey’s Café, just a quick stroll from the Castillo Gallery. “I was more of an A/V nerd. It wasn’t until I went to college in Chicago that I started to appreciate where I was from and what the culture that surrounded me expressed.”

When he returned from Chicago in the mid-1990s, he joined a Miami crew of artists that included Hernan Bas, Naomi Fisher, William Cordova and others whose stars continue climbing.

“We all converged around the Art Center on South Beach. We were just a bunch of unemployed Miami kids who had come back from college and were trying to figure out how to launch our careers,” he says.

“There were not many institutions in Miami then. There was the Miami Art Museum, but no MOCA. There weren’t a lot of galleries that even showed the most contemporary kind of work. You had the Coral Gables galleries that focused on more old-school work. So as a group, we started renting warehouses together to do projects; we did house shows. We were just a small group.”

Eventually, Gispert took off for Yale, then moved to New York. But he returns to Miami regularly to visit his family and his wife Teresa’s family. Each time they return, they find a more evolved Miami art scene.

“Now there’s the PAMM, which is an amazing addition for Miami,” Gispert says. “It suggests a Miami art scene finally coming of age. When I was here in the 1990s, a lot of the artists knew one another. We hung out, went to the same parties. Now I come back and I think, where did all of these artists come from? There is such a volume of working artists in Miami these days. You can actually have a career here now. In the 1990s, it was more of a fantasy to think that you could find gallery representation and make it from here.”

There may be no such thing as a Miami school, no movement that can directly be defined as bubbling up at a specific time, by a specific set of artists in this city. But Gispert can nonetheless make connections, at least when it comes to the work of his own homies from the 305.

“I think when it comes to myself, Naomi, Hernan, William and a few others, there is no fear of the romantic or of the poetic. Which is different from some of the hard-line contemporary artists who are just conceptual and cold and intellectual. Not that the work of the artists I’m mentioning is not intellectual. But there’s never a fear of beauty, nature, color, narrative. There is also a sense of the tongue-in-cheek in some of our work. Not that it’s funny ha-ha. These are not sight-gag artists, they’re not one-liner artists. But there is a sense of humor, of the ironic, that can run through our work.”