



Orlando Museum of Art's 2019 Florida Prize in Contemporary Art rejoices in the chaotic, transcendent interconnectedness of the world

The Florida Prize in Contemporary Art is an invitational exhibit now in its sixth year. Annually, 10 Florida-based artists are selected by the Orlando Museum of Art to show – one receives a significant monetary prize, underscoring OMA's commitment to support our state's talent and achievement; one receives the People's Choice Award, showcasing the enthusiasm for contemporary art that director Glen Gentele, curator Hansen Mulford and the OMA staff have cultivated in the Orlando public over the life of the prize.

JB Y: This year's players: Robert Aiosa, Joe Fig, Lilian Garcia-Roig, Lola Gómez, Amer Kobašlija, Pepe Mar, Anja Marais, Edison Peñafiel, Vickie Pierre and Sri Prabha.

We have covered this exhibit since it started, and we applaud the hard work by OMA that curates and mounts what has become the most essential annual exhibition in Central Florida. In fact, I wonder if it has influenced the movement toward celebrating living artists in other media as, for instance, the Alterity Chamber Orchestra does, that has finally taken root here.

RTR: It's a remarkably even show this year. Strength in every artist's work is high, and an intertwining visual dialogue is going about nature and what we're doing to it, and about humanity and what we're doing to each other. In years past I sometimes felt like the show was a series of isolated incidents, but this year there's a psychic flow to it that draws you through.



Pepe Mar
"Vogueing," 2018

JB Y: OMA always opens these shows with a banger, and 2019's no different. Pepe Mar's maximalist approach – exuberant color in multiple mediums, and a generally nightclubby effect/affect – is great. Curator Hansen Mulford says

Mar was inspired by the LGBT community in Miami, and this installation, *HOME*, refers to the sense of belonging he found in the clubs after moving to Miami from Mexico. You can lounge on the beanbags scattered over blue Astroturf before you enter the next gallery, but sadly, no cocktails or music.

RTR: Yeah, the next gallery: Get drawn into Sarasota artist Joe Fig's documentary models of artists' studios, in which paint splatters, extension cords and globs of glue are almost scientifically replicated in teensy-tiny scale. "Philip Taafe: February 25, 2014" is one such model, based on a specific day he visited. He also paints exquisitely realistic paintings of viewers viewing paintings in museums – kind of an infinite loop of painting and viewing. As associate curator Coralie Claeysen-Gleyzon says, they are about how people look at paintings and also about how paintings look at us.

JB Y: Claeysen-Gleyzon called the technique "*mise en abyme*." Opposite of the miniatures, these meta-paintings can seem more technique than concept, but they're about seeing and being seen. Too deep?

RTR: Not at all, never. And anyway Fig won the People's Choice award of \$2,500 at the exhibition opening party, so who's to say what's too deep?

JB Y: Turn around and Lilian Garcia-Roig scales you up to huge, messy *plein-air* portraits of Florida's jungle, literally a volte-face to Fig's meticulous little man-made studios and canvases.

RTR: Florida's natural environment, especially south Florida's wetlands, has an order all its own. To many, it looks like chaos. Garcia-Roig, an FSU art professor born in Cuba, intimately documents this, and it's not chaos, but rather an artist meeting it halfway and bringing us back the result.

Garcia-Roig's take on the Florida landscape segues to Amer Kobašlija, an Orlando artist who hails from Bosnia and Herzegovina. He paints a sort of Florida Realism, depicting people, including his own family, wading through the trash-strewn natural environment. "Lowe's Tubes" shows dozens of candy-colored inner tubes draped over an old dead tree, for rent at Itchnetucknee Springs. It's a poignant image, uniquely Florida and says a lot about how we treat nature as a tool around here.

JB Y: Next we come to Anja Marais. Her area narrows the view to black and white, a deliberate reference to her identity as a white African. Her installation channels piles of white-washed found objects into totems of self and family. Where Kobašlija showed junk misplaced in Florida's nature, Marais elevates it into sacred cairns.

RTR: Marais' beautifully detailed work has a raw, earthy energy that sends you seamlessly into the next artist, Robert Aiosa. As a sculptor, he reflects on architecture and carpentry specifically. "Causes of Uncertainty," a slyly titled installation, exalts hammer, ladder and sawhorses into monumental fine art – bronze and polished walnut – contrasting with the rough-sawn lumber strewn over it. I saw it as a tribute to the craftsmen who shape our spaces.

JBY: Valuing the tools over the finished work, or process over product.

RTR: "Allowable Capacity for Deception" is a wooden grid resembling OMA's ceiling set at an angle to the wall and floor, as if it had crashed down, its capacity finally exceeded. While Fig eloquently comments on the making and viewing of art, Aiosa suggests how the museum itself might be influenced by the art. It's quite nice.

I'm disappointed, however, that we were promised Aiosa's "Classic Column" in the press release but didn't get it! There's also a slight mistake in the museum's text, which should cite Morris Architects as the design author of the museum's ceiling, itself a nod to Marcel Breuer's famous Whitney museum.

JBY: What an architect you are. Let's not quibble, but instead discuss Lola Gómez's powerful photographs. *Stuck in Time*, *Trail of Death* and *Living in Shadows* are photojournalistic series – she shoots for the *Daytona Beach News-Journal* – of Florida families stuck in the muck, dealing with hurricanes, the awful consequences of opioid addiction, and the tentative existence of undocumented immigrants' lives. They yield a deep sense of humans buffeted by larger-than-life forces.

RTR: These were so intimate, and they struck me deeply. Partly because they are not staged, but yet classically composed. *Stuck in Time* has an image of boat, buildings, and a vehicle wrecked and sinking into mud that is iconic. In *Living in the Shadows*, where she followed an undocumented family, there's a portrait of the mother hugging her son at the bus stop after school. The love in her face comes through a bitter toughness, and there is a dramatic irony how much the family lives on the edge, and how much it means for her to have him simply just come home from school. Like normal, you know?

JBY: Gómez portrays humans struggling against the "what" of disaster, fear and death. The next artist, Edison Peñafiel, shows a struggle that is in many ways far worse: the struggle against meaninglessness and absurdity, or the "why." His video installation "Sempiterno" is creepy, awful, but somehow riveting to watch: a couple of dozen black-and-white screens show people

picking stuff up, putting it down. Mechanically stepping in circles with toy horses. Spinning fans and looking at the camera blankly.

RTR: This installation was adapted from a previous exhibit at the 2018 Florida Biennial in Hollywood, Florida. It has an epic, almost Kafka-esque quality. It is insidious in its questions about power and sanity. These scenes have no beginning or ending. The actors' tasks have no completion. There's no closure. They're doing it because they have to, not because they want to. Certainly anyone doing trivial tasks at their day job can relate. Peñafiel won this year's Florida Prize of \$20,000, and I think his "Ni Aquí, Ni Allá," which we discuss at the end of this story, has a lot to do with that.

JB Y: This installation is incongruous in the same gallery as Vickie Pierre's work, which has a completely different angle. She's a Haitian-born artist living in Florida who uses pop culture and found objects to examine black feminine identity. She calls her latest series of paintings and collages "Poupées."

RTR: What are *poupées*?

JB Y: Dolls. Pierre seems to use the word as a metaphor for the eternal feminine. She sticks to a palette of black, white, gilt and blushy-pink, with swashy text lifted from pop songs, vintage perfume bottles, swags of beads, candelabra and trompe-l'oeil draping, in massive displays. Her work is a fascinating narrative, accessible as visual poetry describing romantic, heroic and melancholic aspects of femininity, yet somehow impersonal –upper-case *She* rather than she.

RTR: I loved Pierre's installations, and was especially fascinated by her paintings of soft, abstract black forms twisted into shapes by glittery coilings and bindings. Their energy – spurting out in colorful teardrop shapes – ties into the thread of animism running through other artists' work in this show.

JB Y: Yes, and it takes you right into Sri Prabha's installation in the next gallery, perhaps the climax of the show.

"Spaceresearchcentre/AKA Southern Lights, via the Transmutable Central Dharma Gateway Incorporating the 5 Known Elements" is an immersive sound and light and color experience. Giant structures hanging from the ceiling represent the natural world, organized into the Vedic elements of earth, air, fire, water and ether. These pods hang from the ceiling, sort of kite-like, with more paintings on the walls, images projected over them, and little shrines of natural materials in all the corners. It's overwhelming and beautiful and stimulating.

RTR: I had the same reaction. However, you must read the wall text to get what he's really doing with the five elements and how to become more interconnected with nature and the earth.

JB Y: It was chaotic, a kind of colorful fever, but yes, it runs the risk of being Instagram bait if viewed shallowly – particularly the little tipi in the center, "a machine for transcendence," Hansen Mulford called it. I liked how Prabha completes the circle started at the beginning of the whole exhibit, but it wasn't quite the end, was it?

RTR: It wasn't, that's right. If you are brave enough to pass through curtained openings in the back, you will find Peñafiel's "Ni Aquí, Ni Allá" ("Neither Here, Nor There"). It's a bringdown after Prabha, expertly placed to shake the viewer up.

JB Y: I wasn't sure if I should go in, but I did. The room's claustrophobic, filled with luggage, furniture and boxes roped together in mounds, the ropes "tied" to a video projection of refugees on a the far wall. You're behind the refugees pulling these ropes, endlessly trudging.

If the rest of the show to some degree avoids political commentary, Peñafiel brings you back to the now and how many people exist in a perpetual quest to escape dictatorship. It's a warning, a harbinger of horror and a larger-than-life commentary about the meaning of borders and roads.

RTR: If you stay in this room even for a moment, you get a sense of separation and disconnection and you flee, gladly, back into Prabha's beautiful expression of interconnectivity and convergence.

JB Y: The whole show was so well-orchestrated that the experience was more seamless and immersive than in any previous year. The artists weren't necessarily talking to each other, but the imagery and ideas reflected off each other and amplified certain responses in the viewer. Bravo and brava to the OMA team.