

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Artists Sift Through Archives for Memories of Miami

For this exhibition, artists searched through home videos, letters, documents, and images, finding physical ephemera and strange histories with which to create new work.

Monica Uszerowicz March 20, 2017



*MemoryLab* installation view (all photos by Barron Sherer unless otherwise noted; all work sources courtesy the Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Florida Moving Image Archives at Miami Dade College, HistoryMiami Museum, South Florida)

Juan Maristany's "Untitled," a two-channel video installation of archived home videos, is currently projected across a 32-foot-long wall on the second floor of the HistoryMiami Museum. The wall is curved, bending to match the gaze of the eye and the flow of a walk around its length. "Untitled" is part of *MemoryLab*, an exhibition curated by Kevin Arrow and Barron Sherer of Obsolete Media Miami. The 16 featured artists/collectives (all of whom have ties to Miami, but currently live scattered throughout the country) were invited to explore the archives of both HistoryMiami — dating back 10,000 years — and the Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Florida Moving Image Archives. The artists searched through home videos, letters,

documents, and images, finding physical ephemera and strange histories with which to create new work.

Each of Maristany's found images or looped clips is visible only long enough to briefly imprint themselves the brain; then, they fade, dissipating into ocean waves or smooth blackness. In one shot, there's an unmoving pistachio-colored house, single-storied, low-roofed, and blanketed with palms. It's unclear when the video was taken, but it's a familiar, timeless scene to anyone who's grown up in South Florida: the intrinsically cozy quality of a subtropical landscape, homes ostensibly protected by the dense flora surrounding them.



Juan Maristany, "Untitled" (2017), two-channel video installation / projection mapped, 20 x 32 feet

What does memory look like? Don Arnold and Richard Roberts, two researchers at the University of Southern California, engineered small probes to light up the synapses of a living neuron in real time. They discovered that when new memories are formed, the synapses that appear as bright spots along the neuron's branches (dendrites) change shape. Memory, then, looks like literal shifting patches of light, given the right conditions. And what of Florida's memory? Does it, too, look like scattered patches of light?

Miami's reputation — a long history of not caring much for its history — is unfair; consider efforts like the Florida Memory Project, or Obsolete Media Miami itself. The entirety of Florida has a complicated history, of diaspora and weird ecologies and "only in Florida" tales, and the future of South Florida specifically is equally complex, threatened with sea-level rise and the questionable ethics of its cities' council members. All histories are multifaceted, contingent on who's telling it, and that's maddeningly clear here. In their examination of

Miami's history, the artists in *MemoryLab* are essentially communicating the city's present and future, because life is too cyclical to keep it all separated.



Julie Kahn, "DEPOST (trading post)" (2017), Spanish-American war Cigarette trading cards, artist trading cards, Seminole trade objects, trade objects from Havana Biennial & Art Basel Miami Beach, audio, video, dimensions variable

Glowing like a bright synapse at the exhibition's entrance is an installation by Domingo Castillo, who placed on a wall several maquettes depicting various developments throughout Miami. In the wall's center are four videos displaying, in juxtaposition, the policing of Miami's neighborhoods and Getty images of plastered shots of high-rises and birds soaring over an Atlantic Ocean intended for the rich. The piece has an accompanying reader titled "Yesterdays, Tomorrow, Today," a 245-page document including the W.A.G.E. manifesto and essays like Paul S. George's "Policing Miami's Black Community" and Raymond A. Mohl's "The Interstates and the Cities: Highways, Housing, and the Freeway Revolt." Mohl writes, "In Miami, Florida, state highway planners and local officials deliberately routed Interstate-95 directly through the inner-city black community of Overtown... Even before the expressway was built... some in Miami's white and black press asked: 'What about the Negroes uprooted by the Expressway?'" Even without the dense reader — which you must ask for at the museum's front desk — the dichotomy of the images provides enough unsettling context.

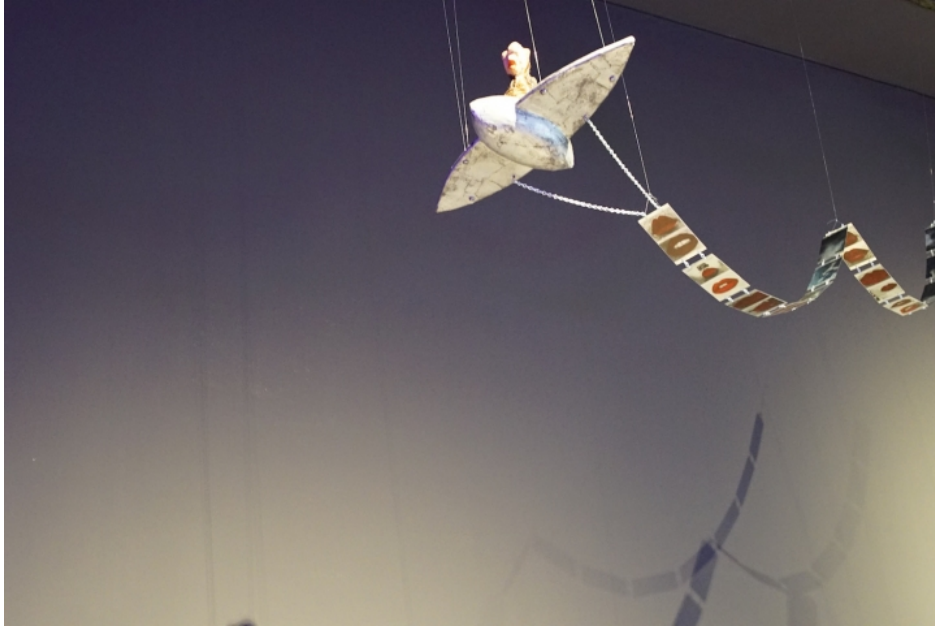
Racial exclusion and xenophobia are examined in "Passing Through," an interactive piece by Elia Khalaf, who sourced home videos of a Cuban family in exile, letters from a mother to her immigrant child, and photographs of a tourist in Lebanon (Khalaf is Lebanese). These are

placed along a wall designed to look like a television. The opposite side is grid-patterned, with each square left blank for museum visitors to write their own notes, working in collaboration with Khalaf to piece together a fragmented history. “We built Miami,” says one; “we were all immigrants once,” reads another. Khalaf’s accompanying text for the piece reads: “In fear of conflict between Christians and Muslims, the end of the Lebanese Civil War resulted in government-mandated censorship barring any mention of the atrocities that occurred within the country between 1970 and 1991. This state of forced amnesia leaves the writing of history to me.” All of us with diaspora in our blood understand what it means to occupy this space, of reimagining your own history, of writing yourself into a narrative that sometimes excludes you.



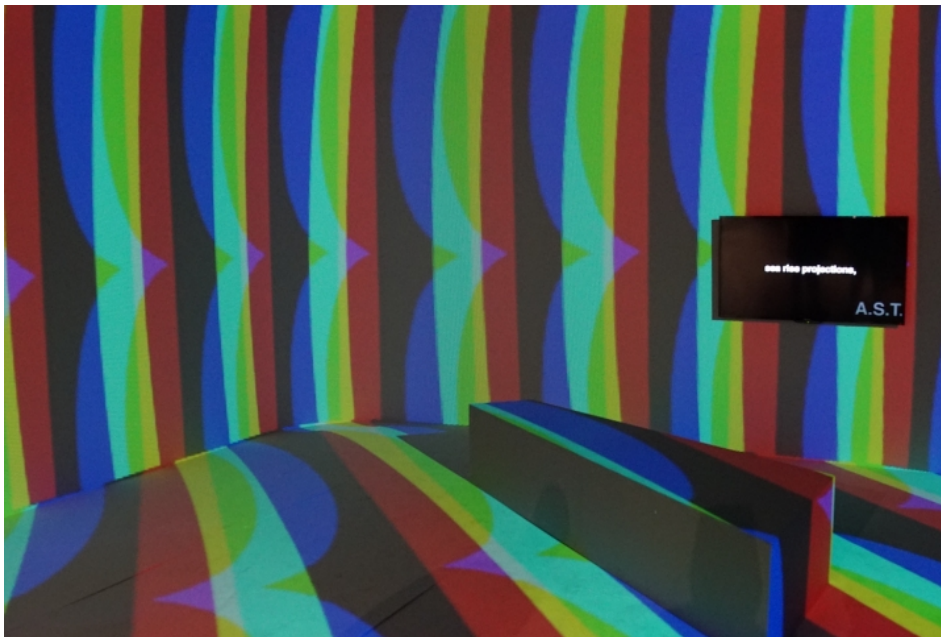
Elia Khalaf, “Passing Through” (2017), digital illustration, film, photography, 8 x 9 feet

In “Untitled (We will settle for a place among the pines and the palms; a city without walls),” Adler Guerrier touches on the idea of diaspora too, his images (both color and scanned black-and-white) of Florida’s plant life acting as backdrop to a small TV showcasing found footage. They’re mostly news reels from 1980 to 1984, showcasing local Floridian reactions to Cuban and Haitian immigrants — one segment features a doctor explaining that, despite a pervasive fear of Haitian refugees bringing AIDS to the US, it is not logical to designate a group of people as being a carrier of disease; another section discusses, pejoratively, the Miami-Dade public school system’s leniency in allowing teens who “can’t speak English” to graduate. But Guerrier, who was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, tells me he does not want to simply highlight the negative backlash with this work, which is also about “the magnetism Miami had to waves of refugees. These Haitians and Cubans, they knew, ‘This is a place we want to be.’”



Shahreyar Ataie, "Lipstick Aviators" (2017), mixed media, dimensions variable

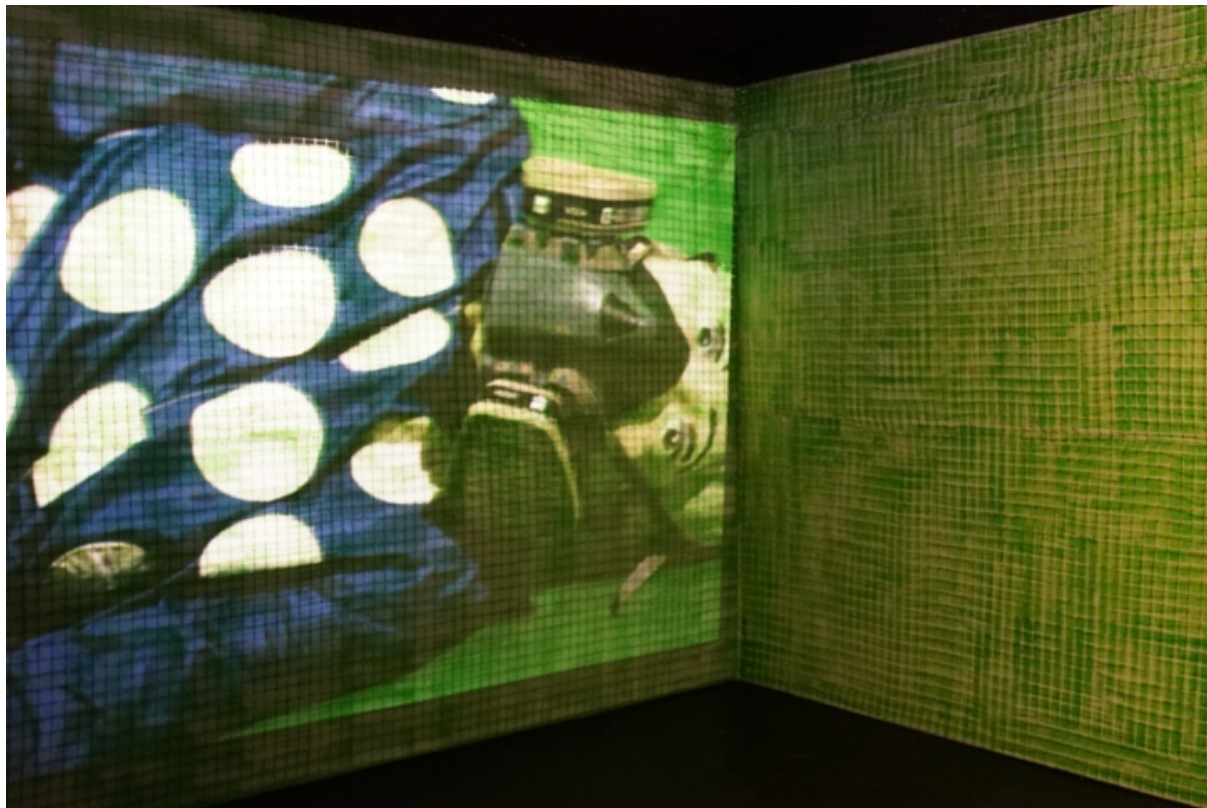
The duo Archival Feedback (T. Wheeler Castillo and Emile Milgrim) captures this magnetism by exploring the peculiar aural landscape of Florida via fieldwork and research. Their three "Audiographs," displayed in a vitrine with headphones for listening, are made of polycarbonate, a material resistant to humidity. "Star Factory" draws upon sounds from the Miami Museum of Science and Space Transit Planetarium, whereas "Sounding the Bay" traces Biscayne Bay through hydrophone recordings — you can hear the gurgling of fish and the sound of cars driving above — and, most fascinatingly, there is "Greater Miami 1934," which translates an old map into electronic sounds — the map is played like music.



Alliance of the Southern Triangle A.S.T. (Diann Bauer, Felice Grodin, Patricia Margarita Hernandez and Elite Kedan), "Landscape (Test Patterns for Future Positions)" (2017), video projection and monitor installation; three-channel video (color, sound), MDF set

Willie Avendano's *Invitation Suites*, two sets of videos comprised of dreamy archival footage — a baby's birthday party, a carnival ride — use data sequencing to repeat and dissolve the images over and over, mimicking the way memories feel inherently chaotic. (Full disclosure: Avendano is a friend.) Only real memory recall is more faulty. *MemoryLab* restrings memories like Christmas lights and data, and we begin to process them like dreams. These realities are composites of so many others, and as such do not really exist, yet we feel, hear, and experience them.

In fact, some of the works seem premonitory, and if so, they might come to fruition and imprint themselves on our memories in a much more deliberate way. In "Landscape (Test Patterns for Future Positions)," a video by the Alliance of the Southern Triangle (Diann Bauer, Felice Grodin, Patricia Margarita Hernandez, and Elite Kedan), weather maps and hurricane-tracking agents become a composite model of everything we can only try to understand about climate change, or weather in general. Foretelling sea-level rise or a hurricane's power are ultimately abstractions, not yet added to our history, though their exigencies feel real enough to reach.



Jamilah Sabur, "A point at zenith: Become a body with organs and smell the flowers" (2017), three-channel video with hyper-directional sound, dimensions variable

Jamilah Sabur's installation, "A point at zenith: Become a body with organs and smell the Flowers," was the last one I explored, and the only one in which I was able to experience in utmost silence. One enters into a room fully projected with a green grid, watching a video in which Sabur is dressed as a jockey wearing a gas mask, trapped in a jai alai court on an upper floor of an abandoned building. This building, explains the piece's accompanying text,

represents the impending, expensive development that will come to stand at the corner of NE 2nd Ave and 50th St in Little Haiti. Here, we have both the fate of a problematic situation and a reference to something that feels decisively Floridian (jai alai originated in Basque, but remains popular in South Florida), a fictional character stuck between the two. As Sabur explained to me, “I imagine that the building is surrounded by toxic air.” This is possible, maybe probable, but we try to reimagine a better outcome for Florida, over and over and over.

*MemoryLab continues at the HistoryMiami Museum (101 W Flagler St, Miami) through April 16.*