

# MIAMI ART

BY ALIX SHARKEY PORTRAIT BY GARY JAMES

## THE WIZARD OF WYNWOOD

*David Castillo Showcases Some of Miami's Best Art at His Namesake Gallery*

**D**avid Castillo loves his job, Miami and contemporary art. Having managed to bring all three together under one roof, he wants to share his passion. "The great thing about art," he says, reclining in his office chair, "is that anyone can approach a work of art and have an opinion, an emotion or an idea about it. Art elicits some kind of primal response from the vast majority of people and invites them to articulate it. And that's what makes art so valuable: It can help people grow in unexpected ways."

This passion for art and artists was the impetus for his purchase and gut rehab of a dilapidated Wynwood warehouse, which subsequently opened as the David Castillo Gallery in November 2005. Since then he has steadily built a roster of talented young and mid-career artists, whose work he is now placing in important private and public collections here and overseas. Castillo is the archetypal hands-on gallerist and dealer, one who believes that artists work better when they collaborate with someone who can handle what Andy Warhol called "the art of business, the most beautiful art there is."

His game plan seems to be working: Two of his artists recently received glowing reviews from *New York Times* art critics. Mexican-born Miami artist Pepe Mar's first New York solo show was described as "delightful, funny and scary...combustive sculptural hysteria," and, the piece added, evocative of early

ocean surrounding her island homeland.

If there's a link or commonality between the 10 artists represented by Castillo, it's the emphasis on a conceptual framework underpinning their work. Or as the gallerist puts it: "All the artists I've chosen to represent have something underlying in their work that deals with modernity, some aspect of modern art history." His ideal, he says, is to find and nurture these conceptual links between today's young artists and the great beasts of modernity and their works.

But while Castillo represents several Latin-Ameri-

Francisco, and Cuban-born Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova, who's another Miami-based artist. And then there's Quisqueya Henríquez—the only one of my artists whose work deals specifically with certain concepts and stereotypes of Latin America—who is half-Dominican, half-Cuban, studied in Havana and lives and works in the Dominican Republic. But while Aramis Gutierrez, for example, was born in Venezuela, he grew up in Pittsburgh and his work has no direct reference to Latin America or its peoples."

Castillo was born in Madrid in 1973 to Cuban parents who had fled the Castro regime, but the family moved to Miami when he was just three months old. His childhood fascination with art eventually led him to study history and art history at Yale University, where he specialized in Renaissance and medieval art and worked in the curatorial department of the university's art gallery before moving to Rome to continue his research into Benedictine monastic art.

"My interest in art was always there, but I assumed I would go on to teach," he says. "I didn't think I would ever have a business." But his specialist knowledge and increasing contact with serious collectors led to him being asked to help assess the authenticity and provenance of paintings. Almost organically



David Castillo, here at his gallery in front of Aramis Gutierrez's *After "A Hundred Years of Solitude"*, is committed to Miami's art scene.

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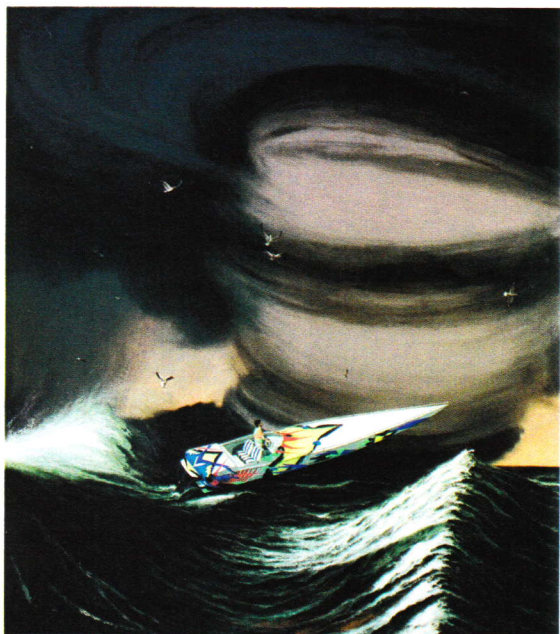
Picasso montages. Dominican artist Quisqueya Henríquez's show at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in October was lauded as "playful and inventive....Ms. Henríquez's sculptures are funny, tough, enlightening and curious—in short, everything artwork in a museum should be." In particular, the *Times* liked the salty-tasting bright-blue ice cream given out free, which the artist had made with seawater imported from the

320 Ocean Drive, March 2008

can artists and also works with collectors from that continent, he is keen to disambiguate between ethnicity, artistic themes and lazy Anglocentric stereotypes. "I don't sell Latin-American art," he says crisply. "That is a genre. I have artists who are from Latin America, but that's a question of geography and birth. First and foremost, they're contemporary artists. So we represent Pepe Mar, who is Mexican but studied in San



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Above: *Lazy Sunbathers*, 2007, by Aramis Gutierrez. Oil on canvas, 72" x 84".

Left: *The 80s*, 2007, by Aramis Gutierrez. Oil on canvas, 130" x 115".

he became an authority, and it was a small step from assessing the value of artworks to assisting in their sale and purchase. The first work he was involved in selling was a painting by legendary Cuban painter Wifredo Lam—"a pretty

tant collectors of contemporary and modern Latin-American art."

The transition from private dealer to public gallerist, he says, was a natural one. "I realized I wanted to have a gallery that would show and promote the work of younger artists, work that I believed in, where I would be the one to develop their careers with collectors and museums. I was fascinated by art history's continuum and how modern and contemporary art are linked. To make that connection in a gallery situation is very exciting for me. As opposed to the secondary market—work by established artists, many of whom are already dead, and which is already established as part of art history."

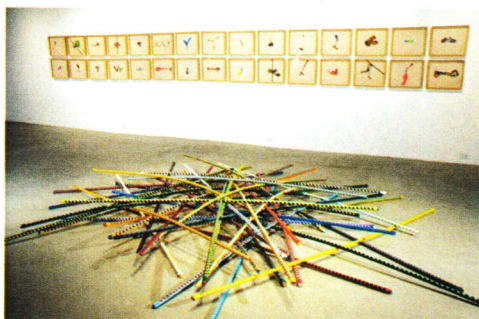
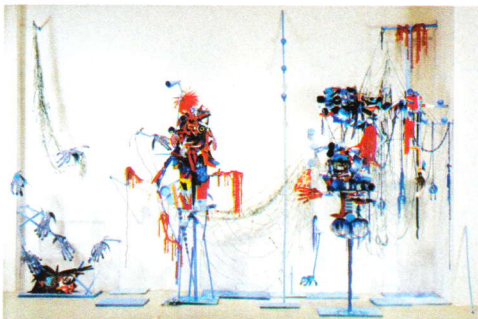
When it came to opening his own gallery, he knew there was only one possible location. "Miami is home in a very profound sense for me. Even if there wasn't a Wynwood, I would still have my primary gallery here. My family and my life are rooted in this city, and with my background it makes perfect sense to be here. Some people were a little perturbed that I

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Above: *Garden Hose* (left), 2007, by Frances Trombly, crocheted cotton and metal hook, 32 linear feet; *Extension Cord* (right), 2007, by Frances Trombly, crocheted cotton, 50 linear feet.

Below: *Please Don't Stop the Music* (left), 2007, by Pepe Mar, collage and assemblage installation, 137" x 188" x 63"; *A Heap of Paradise* (right), 2007, by Quisqueya Henríquez, PVC tubes and rubber, dimensions variable (each of 40 tubes is 115" long by 1" wide).



elevated place to start." He was soon referred by one collector to another and working as a private art dealer "almost by accident."

"At first it was just trial and error, seeing a lot of art collections over the years," Castillo says. "I started with clients who have between 400 and 700 works of art—major collectors, many of whom are aged 50 and over. So these are people who've been studying and collecting for decades. This list of serious collectors includes Joan and Milton Bagley in Florida, Jake and Todd Figi in California, and Robert and Jereann Chaney in Texas, who have one of the world's most important collections of Asian art as well as a world-class collection of rock 'n' roll memorabilia. I also have a lot of Latin-American clients who have residences in Miami, including Solita Cohen, and Patricia Phelps de Cisneros [chairperson and co-founder of the Caracas-based Colección Cisneros], who is one of the world's most impor-

opened here rather than New York, but now, two years later, even the doubting Thomases are convinced. And I can now tell you—and *Ocean Drive* is the first to learn this—that our success so far means that we'll be opening a new branch of the David Castillo Gallery later this year on New York's Lower East Side."

Castillo believes the widely predicted economic downturn will have very little influence on the future of the high-end art market. "What happens for the art market at large is there's always a shakeout of the less committed galleries, and you're left with the serious galleries, those with a long-term vision and a strong identity. The gallerists who change exhibitions on a regular basis, who have clients they've cultivated over years, have serious curatorial endeavours, and place the work of their artists in museums—the serious galleries are always going to be there, no matter what. But the people who are in Miami, for example, just to piggyback on Art Basel, they will probably find themselves in trouble."

Meanwhile, Castillo enjoys the visceral thrill that only art can give and hopes to share it with an increasingly wider audience. "I still get the primal response because I love art in a natural way," he says. "I can walk into a gallery or museum and see something that gives me goose pimples or makes me maudlin and want to cry. But professionally you also have to be able to stand back and have that highly analytical and critical viewpoint. After all, that's my job." ■