

# MOCA Goes Global



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## NORTH MIAMI'S ART MUSEUM SEEKS TO TRANSCEND CULTURES AS IT MAKES ITS WAY

The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in North Miami and its artists are bursting to tell you their stories.

So for this column, we'll step aside a bit and let the artists do the talking. Two exhibits are well worth a look: "Beijing Booster: The Art of Peter Wayne Lewis," and "Chromatic Aporias" by Rafael Lopez-Ramos in the MOCA Project Gallery.

If that sounds mystifying, join the club and stick around.

The exhibit of works by Kingston-born Peter Wayne Lewis includes colorful, jazzy acrylics on linen and rice paper, riffing off the internal patterns of our double helixes, chromosomes, and synapses, playing on science and our common humanity.

When Mayor Smith Joseph welcomed him on September 12, he said, "This is life!"

Look at the individual pictures, and then stand back and look at the walls, and you get the sense that you're swimming in a sea of synaptic snapshots of the life processes brimming within each of us.

The exhibit is called "Beijing Booster" because Lewis teaches at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and lives in Boston; South Orange, N.J.; and Beijing, where he also keeps a gallery and which he chose for its vibrant art scene and air of intrigue. This alone should make him feel at home in



Artist Peter Wayne Lewis at the opening of his MOCA show. Photo courtesy of MOCA

Miami.

"I travel because it makes me better at becoming a teacher," Lewis says. "It's important to gather knowledge and matter in space. This planet is mine. I claim it. In China I'm comfortable. I feel like I'm home. Beijing. Shanghai is like a crossroads, and I consider myself a citizen of the world. It's the art ecosystem. I do not want to be pigeonholed."

While that might sound intense, he's an easy conversationalist. He explains that he had an eclectic upbringing as the son of a classically trained jazz pianist, and grew up with Beethoven, Charlie Parker, and Ornette Coleman as soundtracks.

He attended the exhibit's opening wearing a black *yukata* (a lightweight summer kimono), and I broke the ice by asking if he was in the contemplative tradition.

He readily said yes and cited the Upanishads as a basis for his work, saying that "we are reflections of the cosmos and the cosmos is a reflection of us."

"These are mindscapes, not landscapes," he said. "This is not abstract art. These are not perceptual paintings. They're real. They are mediating information to the world."

He cribs mantras from Bob Marley ("Free your mind from mental slavery") and the Funkadelics ("Free your mind and your ass will follow.")

After an hour or so over beers with Lewis at Billy's Pub Too, Bob Marley and the Funkadelics start to rub off.

Lopez-Ramos was born in Cuba in 1962 and left only in 1997, migrating to Vancouver, British Columbia, where he lived for more than ten years before wending his way to Miami. He's gradually seen *el exilio* culture loosen its grip. (It's clearly still here -- the laundry guy on Brickell told me that Pope Francis is a communist because he didn't meet with dissidents.)

Each work in his "Chromatic Aporia" series is a riot of two colors (red and green, blue and orange, violet and yellow) with juxtaposed perplexing or parallel images connoting the symbiotic cultures of Cuba and the United States -- Uncle Sam and a revolutionary; Mighty Mouse and a raised fist; Superman and a señorita with maracas. Hence the Greek-rooted word "aporia" (literally meaning an impasse or puzzlement), or the notion that paired ideas can sow contradiction and doubt.

"For me, the paintings embody the quality of aporia, or holding opposites in

one image, such as Uncle Sam and the revolutionary -- with four paintings focusing on the same concept," says Lopez-Ramos. "They reflect the new scenario between Cuba and the United States. I think my paintings are carnivalesque, with this mixing of different references. You have a tourist promotion poster from before the revolution. Cuba is so near and so far."

His exhibit opened September 19, the very night of La Gran Fiesta, a packed Hispanic heritage festival in MOCA Plaza, with people from all kinds of ethnicities dancing to surprising Andean rhythms, Bolivian bands, and other groups reflecting the varied constellation of Latin America.

And that brings us to the immediate business of MOCA, which last year was riven by the divorce of its board (none of whom actually lived in North Miami) from the museum. The old MOCA board went on to create the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, now emerging in Wynwood. City-owned MOCA soldiers on with \$1.5 million, a loan from the City of North Miami, and applications pending for at least 25 grants.

As this column goes to press, 13 of the 18 members of MOCA's newly reconstituted board are preparing to fly to Bogotá (\$275 or so roundtrip from either Miami or Fort Lauderdale) at their own expense to make links with artists and institutions at ARTBO -- or Art Bogotá -- a premier Latin American art fair running October 1-4.

Mayor Joseph is also buying his own ticket to the fair. (No city money for foreign trips this time.)

The trip is a windup for MOCA's Art Basel exhibit, "Latin America and the Global Imagination," which is scheduled to run until MOCA's gala in February.

MOCA's director, 61-year-old Babacar M'Bow, loves to talk about his vision for the museum. The Senegalese-born son of former UNESCO Director-General Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow (now 94 and living in Morocco) is, like the artist Peter Lewis, quite comfortable calling himself a citizen of the world.

"The new vision of the museum is strongly centered on the local, and entirely open to the world," M'Bow says. "We will be signing a memorandum of understanding with different museums in Colombia. Our focus is the common DNA in us, or what we have in common, rather than our differences. This is a time when we in America can take leadership in articulating the oneness of the human race. It is a very happy time."

Say what you like, but at this time -- when Pope Francis comes to Congress

in the luckiest nation on earth in this mean season of petty politics, threats to build walls, and of the vast suffering as refugees flee the Middle East and Africa, as the pontiff gently challenges us as citizens of "the land of the free and the home of the brave," and as he asks us to plumb within to understand our common humanity and act on it -- can this vision of art and life be such a bad thing?

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