

## A 'Space' that's filled by history's shadow

Jessica Dawson



*"Spring Sprang Sprung," by Miami-based artists Alain Guerra and Neraldo de la Paz, was created with a store's worth of castoff clothing. (Guerra De La Paz)*

I disagree -- firmly, vehemently -- with "Space, Unlimited." Not with the show's presentation (two smartly installed floors at the Art Museum of the Americas), or with its seven youngish artists (most born in the 1960s), or even with its witty, often complex artworks.

It's the title I resist. Curators Tatiana Flores and Laura Roulet say that the exhibition gathers artists who create "space," a term Roulet defines as "architectural dimensions, natural environment, personal habitat, or the parameters of one's interior world."

Given these 18-lane-wide constraints, though, could any artwork not belong in "Space, Unlimited"? Such a throwaway concept undersells what this exhibition accomplishes, vividly. "Space, Unlimited" shows us just how terrifying it is to be an artist right now.

In nearly all the show's pieces -- and there is one self-assured exception -- we sense a waking terror at the long shadow of art history. With so many Titians and Mondrians behind us, how to carve the road forward? Beat them or join them?

To these questions, the "Space, Unlimited" artists offer smart, often humorous answers. Some poke fun at art history, others join it.

Head upstairs to the museum's second floor for the exhibition's standout: a glorious extravagance of an installation called "Spring Sprang Sprung." (The piece alone justifies a visit.) A massive tree-shaped sculpture by artist-duo Guerra de la Paz (Alain Guerra and Neraldo de la Paz, both Cuban-born and now living in Miami), the work stands in a gallery adjacent to a series of canvases by Havana-born painter Lilian Garcia-Roig, now a Tallahassee resident.

The artists work out similar, if inverse, issues: Guerra de la Paz renders landscape as painterly sculpture, and Garcia-Roig produces sculptural landscape painting. Both riff on the breakdown of a painting/sculpture divide that began 100 years ago, with Picasso (or even earlier, with Courbet and Manet).



*Magdalena Fernandez of Venezuela assembled "1pm006, Ara Araurana," a video take on modernist canvases with a surprising soundtrack. (Douz And Mille)*

Back to "Spring Sprang Sprung." This rich, bewildering artwork is the best kind of political art - - stealthy in its opinion but firm in its conviction. And, like the best works in the history of landscape -- I'm thinking of Nicolas Poussin's Arcadian revels or John Constable's anti-Industrial Revolution pastorals -- it's about more than just the shrubbery.

To make it, the artists bound, tied, twisted and draped hundreds of sweaters, shawls, jackets and pants -- a Salvation Army's worth of castoffs -- to form a massive, aged tree. Ancient but hefty, muscular but dowager-humped, it could be a banyan or oak so large that gallery walls can't contain it.

In Guerra de la Paz's hands, articles of clothing become a pointillist palette of color and texture. Differently colored clots of suede, leather, wool, acrylic and cotton climb from root to trunk. Up top near the gallery ceiling, castoffs of lime and pink suggest blooms and leaves. Garment sleeves drape from limbs like moss. A soundtrack of tweeting birds and insect hum creates a Disneyesque mood.

Step away from this riot of colored clothes and the action happens on the retinas, where colors blend into convincing, treelike hues. Yet even from afar, "Spring Sprang Spring" retains its resolute thingness: It's a massive object in space, a sculptural entity that imposes and intimidates.

And so our awareness returns, again and again, to its materials. Many of these castoffs look perfectly wearable. Maybe there's a hole here or a tear there, but its owner discarded it anyway. The tree is made from waste and extravagance (or, seen as its opposite, a trove for the poor). As a tree of abundance or of excess, it's planted in richly political soil.

Although less pregnant with meaning, Garcia-Roig's canvases in an adjacent room complement Guerra de la Paz's efforts. Here, a series of nine canvas panels are installed across three walls. At the room's corners, paintings are set on a diagonal to form a nearly 180-degree panorama. Called "Hyperbolic Nature: New Hampshire Fall," the multi-panel cacophony of texture and color surrounds us in a dizzying wooded landscape.

This is an immersive environment. Tubefuls of crimson, ocher, green and white lie on the canvas like lines drawn on the surface. The color sits like slugs or caterpillars, snakes, excrement or even shoelaces. Garcia-Roig overpowers us with texture and color. Our noses, too, get in the act: So much paint gives off an acrid odor.

Downstairs, two works tackle the great -- and grandiose -- painters and architects of modernism. Ada Bobonis of Puerto Rico offers a room with clerestory windowlike light boxes

featuring photographs taken of a 1950s-era building renovation. The work reminds of us of our undying interest in a certain strain of utopian modernism, but it also renders that interest impotent. (A set of stairs attached to a gallery wall make the visual metaphor: They lead up to a light box yet they don't touch the ground.)

Caracas, Venezuela-based Magdalena Fernandez offers a more amusing take on the 20th century's giants. Her nearly two-minute video loop is an animated riff on the forbidding formalist canvases of Piet Mondrian or Ellsworth Kelly.

Fernandez imagined her video as a wrestling match between the big blocks of color set against one another in a typical formalist canvas. Here, Fernandez pits unmatched rivals: to the left, two-thirds of her screen is occupied by an obstinate expanse of blue. To its right, a much smaller rectangle of yellow sits atop a patch of lime. The video finds the puny yellow pushing up against the blue, attempting to annex space from its rival. This proves a Sisyphean task.

The video's proceedings wouldn't mean much without Fernandez's soundtrack. As yellow strains against blue, we hear what sounds like a grown man grunting and huffing. But the joke is on us: The soundtrack turns out to be the recording of a squawking parrot, a bird oblivious to modernism's dominance.

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