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Florencio Gelabert Intersections

The Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum
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FLORENCIO GELABERT

INTERSECTIONS

NOVEMBER 29, 2008 – FEBRUARY 28, 2009

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FIU | Frost Art
Museum

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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Director's Foreword

I remember visiting Florencio Gelabert's studio when he first arrived in Miami in 1990. It was a huge warehouse near the airport, needed to accommodate large-scale sculpture, welding, and other industrial materials. He worked in wood and combinations of metals and chains and rough materials that often made reference to his father's work in Cuba, where he was a sculptor of great renown. The materials were metaphorical for his own voyage into exile and the things he left behind, and a way of maintaining that artistic relationship with his family and the past, while exploring things anew. The elements pertaining to destruction and fragmentation were also there in the early days, as were the aesthetic challenges to the spectator.

In this exhibition, "Intersections" again makes reference to the past and the present, with new materials and new technology. He has taken over the entire gallery to create a site-specific installation with three works that are made of synthetic and organic materials, and videos with digital images, all of which refer to the environment, and the potential for ecological disaster that we are all concerned about today. The art of Florencio Gelabert is timely and challenging. Inspired by the relationships that exist between nature and human beings, his works provoke questions from the viewer, as much as they present confusing visual contradictions between illusion and reality.

At this time I would also like to acknowledge the Frost Art Museum staff, especially my student assistant Stephanie Guasp, and all their work to make this project a success.

Carol Damian
Director and Chief Curator
The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum

Artist's Statement

The essence of my work is to create three-dimensional art forms such as sculpture and installations. Nature, as a symbol of birth, life, harmony, and peace, is a central motif in most of my work. Through my art, I aim to promote people's awareness of the collective responsibility to preserve nature and the earth's natural resources. I am fascinated by the act of creating sculptures and site-specific artworks that relate to human beings and their environment and, in particular, to encourage communication between people and art.

Although wood has been a key element in most of my pieces, I also employ other materials, such as aluminum, polyester resin, fiberglass, clay rock, lights and steel. Many of my pieces recall minimal versions of nature: mountains, trees and imaginary landscapes, just to mention a few. I explore ideas that allow me to confront personal fantasy versus reality, construction versus deconstruction.

Today my sculptures, installations and site-specific works alter the intrinsic value of the definition of objects in such a way as to evoke personal interpretations of conceptual alchemy, forcing the audience to reevaluate the relationship between organic elements, nature and technology.

Florencio Gelabert
Artist

Florencio Gelabert: Intersections Mirage of Reality

“At this point, I dare to distance myself from my work to establish parallels between the imaginary architecture of the early years, and the fragmented columns, walls, and trunks of today’s works; between the pieces made with natural materials, and the imaginary gardens built with fake rocks and artificial flowers; yesterday’s spills and today’s digital cascade. I conclude that I have traveled one long way and encountered many intersections, which at times have been difficult to cross.”

Florencio Gelabert, New York, 25 August 2008.

“Intersections,” as an exhibition project, emerges from parallels Gelabert establishes between his past and his present, between early works made in Cuba in the 1980s, and recent pieces created in New York, where he currently resides. By connecting these two periods of his artistic career, he intends to explain how works that seem at times opposite and antagonistic are in fact coherent within his views of human history, architecture, landscape, life, and death.

A closer look at Gelabert’s early works illustrates how some of the characteristics present in “Intersections,” such as

fragmentation, liquid-like spills, the use of the column as a symbol of Modernity, and philosophical themes such as birth and destruction, appeared in his sculptural pieces early in his career. Putting elements out of their original context and modifying their scale in an effort to create pieces that challenge the spectator, and at the same time harmonize with the spaces they were placed in, is something he has been doing since the very beginning, as illustrated in *Games* (1983) (Figure 1). The interaction between the viewer and the piece is extremely important. Not only does he pay great attention to detail, but he also uses mirrors and polished stainless steel to achieve a multiplication effect, and to integrate the person’s reflection into the piece, as shown in one of the works in this exhibition, *Column Tree* (2008) (Figure 2).

The incorporation of natural elements into his work did not happen until the late eighties. Gelabert recalls the making of *Compression* (1989) (Figure 3), during his first trip to New York, where he traveled on an artist-in-residence grant from the Socrates Sculpture Park (1988-89): “I made this piece with raw materials. I grouped them inspired by their visual force and physical purity. It was the first time I used real tree trunks, unpolished marble, and old steel cables I found in a rubbish dump in Queens.” He also recalls making his first spill, at a much later date, while working on *Occupied Space* (1998) (Figure 4), a site-specific installation conceived for the Museo



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

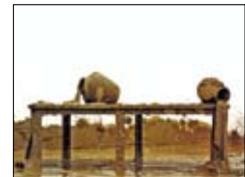


Figure 4

INTERSECTIONS (CONTINUED)

Alejandro Otero, in Caracas, where mud was spilled on the floor of the gallery in a clear reference to the deadly mud slides that occur on the mountains that surround the Venezuelan capital.

Technical innovations arrived later in his career. Photography became the source of a new type of work as he began to document delicate pieces made with objects with natural references, such as silk flowers, and with real petals and leaves. Due to the perishable character of some of the materials, he opted for documenting the result of the creative process and the prints, not the sculptures, became the final works. A list of pieces from this period, including *Crown* (2000-2002) (Figure 5), *Mallet* (2000-2002) (Figure 6), and *My World* (2003) (Figure 7), together with sculptural landscapes such as *Imagine* (2007) (Figure 8), are clearly the origins of the more complex and mature work *Birth* (2008) (Figure 9), presented in "Intersections."

It is important to clarify that none of his works reproduce an existing environment. Rather, they bring nature indoors and give life to the exhibition space, inspiring a playful but serious game in which the artist denounces an ecological disaster. The three works presented in "Intersections," *Column Tree*, *Cycle*, and *Birth*, are made of synthetic materials and manipulated by technological means to reverse what has been wrongly done in real life. It is a wake-up call to the viewers who are invited to live through the exhibit and to react to it based on their own personal experiences.

Originally conceived as part of a larger project, these site-specific works are inspired by the relationships that exist between

nature and human creation. What appears to be romantic representations or interpretations of natural landscapes, a cave, a waterfall, a dry tree, are in fact man-made illusions built with man-made objects. It is somehow a contemporary approach to the "trompe l'oeil" effect of classical works.

Birth represents a segment of a grand landscape that no longer exists. Caved in on a gallery wall, it reproduces the interior of a grotto filled with plants, flowers, and moss, a dreamlike mirage that brings life to the plain white panel. The viewer has to face a contradiction, as he feels the need to enter the cave to enjoy its beauty and its freshness, and realizes it is only an illusion. The plants are made out of plastic, the rocks are made of clay rock and aquaresin, and the cave is just a hole in the wall. Yet, it is enchanting and inspires dreamlike thoughts. *Birth* is a cave, but it is also a symbol. The title suggests the artist's intention to symbolize a cross section of a uterus, giving the viewer a hint how to interpret the work as a representation of a delivery, a nativity, or life itself, or on the contrary, as a confined space, impotence, disappointment and even death.

From Bourriaud's perspective, Gelabert's works are post-production projects. Conceived originally as a photograph, *Birth* explores the possibility of bringing to life a nature morte in a three-dimensional way. Once he conceives an image, which is in no way inspired by a real reference, the artist reconstructs the landscape in his studio, or in this case in the gallery, using artificial elements and putting them out of scale. Neither the rocks nor the plastic plants maintains any proportions. The



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

design is completely arbitrary, except for the height of the hole, which is Gelabert's own height.

As he explains, he likes the freedom he gains from the process of post-production, a technique he has perfected using digital technology, in particular Photoshop and Final Cut Pro, as shown in *Cycle*. This piece is a projection of a waterfall, a recreation of a landscape in digital form. Once again, the viewer may experience a calm feeling as he stands in front of the projection and hears the soothing sounds (digitally produced) in the background. One can easily be transported to a true paradise, even though the image is not what it seems, a beautiful and relaxing natural site, but another post-production, a fake model executed in the studio with man-made materials (except for the water), a mirage of reality.

Some objects in *Cycle* catch the eye: white trunks falling through the waterfall contrast with the rest of the naturally colored scene. These can be traced to an earlier work, *Tree* (1998) (Figure 10), from the series "Natural Relations," in which the artist built a tree with trunks the length of his limbs. In *Cycle*, limbs and other parts of the body are symbolically represented wrapped in plaster and gauze. The dismembered corpse, floating on the water, disturbs the otherwise peaceful and inspiring image, making it darker and even morbid. The presence of the trunks also reminds us that the artist does not intend to represent a landscape but to reconstruct it, to reinterpret it, and this new reality is not necessarily a pleasant one.

The trunks are the main component of the third piece of the exhibit, *Column Tree*, a free standing sculpture in which several

"dismembered body parts," wrapped in white gauze and aquaresin are aligned vertically in an effort to rebuild a mutilated body. Mirrors placed between the parts reflect them, multiplying the image and exalting its presence. Gelabert succeeds in transforming human nature by amplifying the scale with the mirrors, and suggests a brighter future by putting on top of the piece a trunk with two ends that can sprout, two paths that give the soul a choice, two alternatives to pick from, as one continues on the path through life.

This last piece reminds us that sculpture is the apex of Gelabert's work. It also shows how, as he goes forward exploring and mastering new techniques, he succeeds in aesthetically reusing and recycling ideas and images. More importantly, he continues to excel in his aesthetic search while becoming more engaged in an intellectual discourse that awakens the conscience of those who are concerned not only with the future of the environment but, more significantly, and this is his primary goal, to pursue an aesthetic search. With his work, he pretends to evoke personal interpretations inspired in real situations and experiences, and to force the public to reevaluate their relationship with nature, natural disasters, and technology. His work is also a continuous search for new surfaces and forms of presentation, and although he masters new media and technology, he remains loyal to its sculptural essence.

Francine Birbragher
Independent Scholar
September, 2008

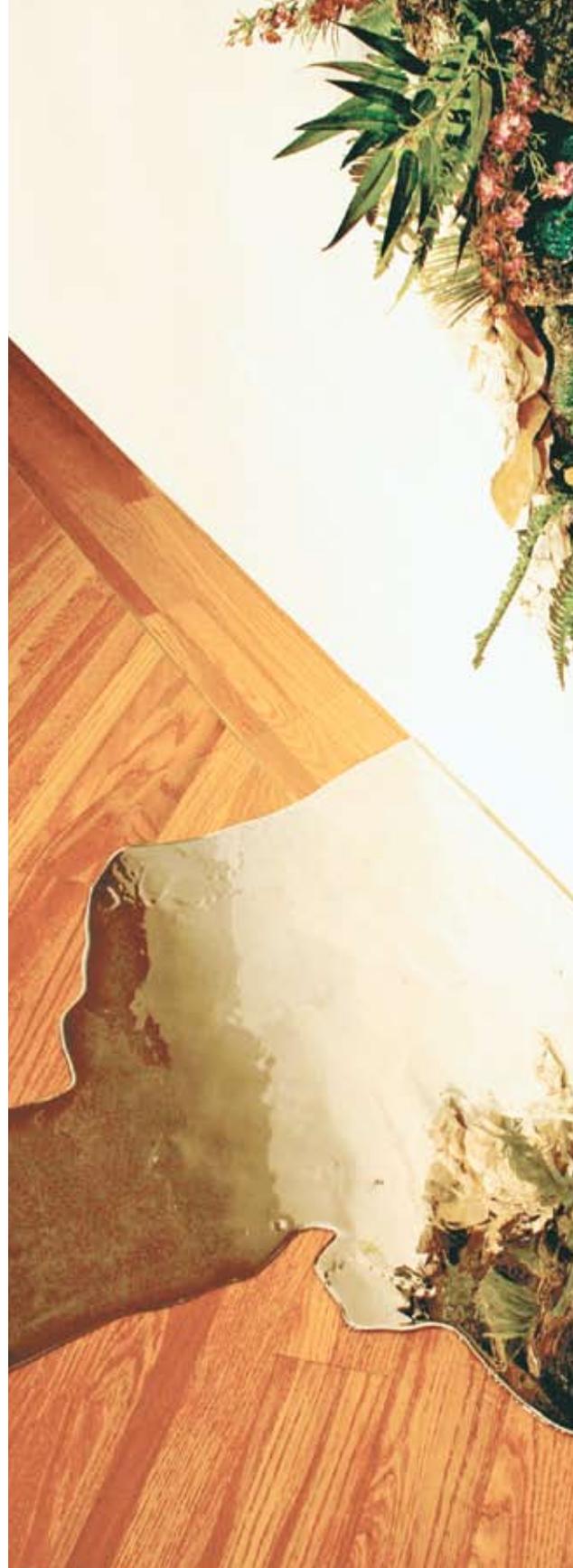


Figure 10





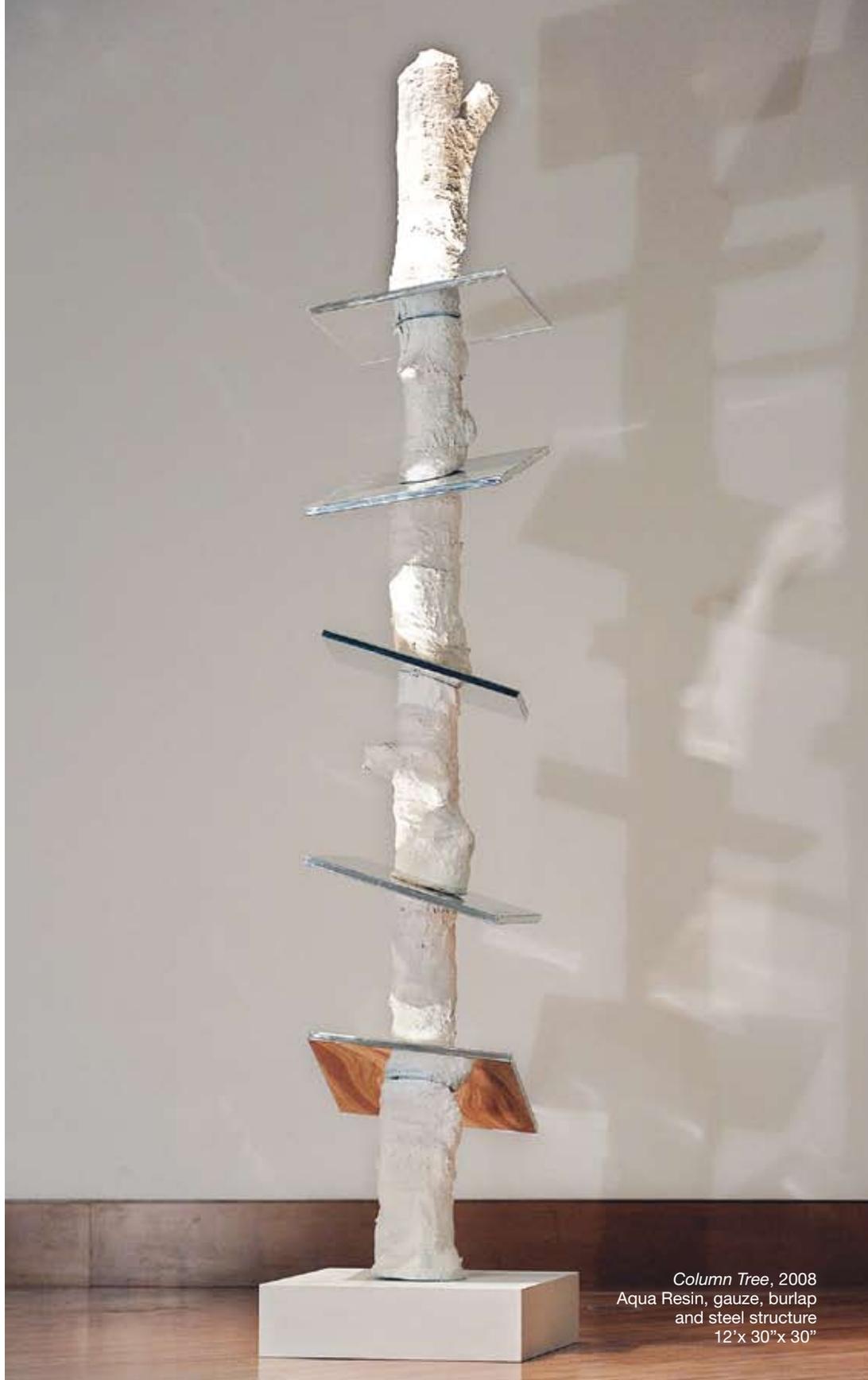
View of "Intersections"





Birth, 2008
Plywood, Styrofoam, Aqua Resin,
soil, artificial plant and flowers
6' x 3' x 1'





Column Tree, 2008
Aqua Resin, gauze, burlap
and steel structure
12'x 30"x 30"





Cycle (stills), 2008
HD video loop
Edition and postproduction Delmira Valladares
3 min length, Edition of 3



Cycle and Column Tree



Column Tree (detail), 2008
Aqua Resin, gauze, burlap
& steel structure
12'x 30"x 30"



Cycle and Column Tree



Florencio Gelabert

Born in Havana, Cuba. Lives and works in New York City.

EDUCATION

MFA University of Miami, Florida, 1998

MA Instituto Superior de Arte, Havana, Cuba, 1989

BA San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts, Havana, Cuba, 1981

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2009 "Accumulations," Chashama Art Studios (LMCC Grant), New York, NY

2008 "Intersections," The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami, FL

2006 "Personal Landscapes," Magnan Emrich Contemporary, New York, NY

2002 "Works in Captivity," Ambrosino Gallery, North Miami, FL

2000 "Vacío," Galería Fernando Serrano, Moguer, Spain

"Paradise," Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

1999 "Herramientas," Galería Euroamericana, Caracas, Venezuela

"New Works," Joan Guaita Art, Palma de Mallorca, Spain

"The Sound of the Forest," Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Jacobo Borges, Caracas, Venezuela

1998 "The Sound of the Forest," Ambrosino Gallery, Miami, FL

"The Sound of the Forest," Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Panamá, Panamá

"Florencio Gelabert- Beyond Violence," Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, FL

"The Seasons," Intar Gallery, New York, NY

1996 "Breaking Ground," Lehigh University Art Gallery, Bethlehem, PA

1994 "La Inutilidad del Uso," Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Coral Gables, FL

"Compression II," Centro Cultural de Tijuana, Tijuana, Mexico

1993 "Recent Sculptures," Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Coral Gables, FL

1989 "Projects and Sculptures," Socrates Sculpture Park & Gallery, New York, NY

"Esculturas II," Galería Balance, Mexico DF, Mexico

1984 "Esculturas," Casa de la Cultura de Plaza (Lyceum and Lawn Tennis Club), La Habana, Cuba

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2008 "Visions: 20th Century Latin Art: Selections from the Nassau County Museum of Art," The Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, FL

2007 "SCOPE-Miami," Magnan Emrich Contemporary, New York, NY

"Art Made for Living," M4 Project, Miami, FL

"NY- Pinta," First Contemporary Latin American Art Fair, New York, NY

"SCOPE-Hamptons," Magnan Emrich Contemporary, Hamptons, NY

"The (S) Files Biennial," El Museo del Barrio, New York, NY

2006 "SCOPE Art Fair," Magnan Emrich Gallery, London, UK

"PULSE Art Fair- New York," Magnan Emrich Gallery, New York, NY

2005 "Art Basel-Miami Beach," Ambrosino Gallery, Miami Beach, FL

2004 "Intersections/Intersecciones," Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT

2003 "Dreidimensional," Galerie Aus Baden-Wuntemberg, Berlin, Germany

"Muestra'2," Feria de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, Mexico

2002 "Art Basel-Miami Beach," Miami Beach, FL

"Bienal Barro de America," Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela

2000 "Inside and Out: Contemporary Sculpture, Video and Installations," Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, FL

"Uppsala Contemporary Art Biennial," Uppsala, Sweden

1998 "Mesotica III," Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo, San Jose, Costa Rica

"III Bienal Barro de America," Museo Alejandro Otero, Caracas, Venezuela

1996 "Cuba Siglo XX Modernidad y Sincretismo," Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, Palma de Gran Canaria, Spain

1994 "To the Encounter of the Others," Documenta Hall, Kassel, Germany

MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Goldberg Collection at Nassau County Museum, Long Island, NY

The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami, FL

Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, FL

Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, FL

Museum of Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM

List of Exhibition Works

Birth, 2008

Plywood, Styrofoam, Aqua Resin, soil,
artificial plant & flowers
6' x 3' x 1'

Column Tree, 2008

Aqua Resin, gauze, burlap & steel structure
12'x 30"x 30"

Cycle, 2008

HD video loop
Edition and postproduction Delmira Valladares
3 min length
Edition of 3

Work Referenced in Essay

Figure 1

Games, 1983
Mirrors, concrete, Styrofoam, tile
8' x 8' x 16"
Courtesy of Lilia Soto Gelabert
Collection, La Habana, Cuba

Figure 2

Column Tree, 2008
Aqua Resin, gauze, burlap
& steel structure
12'x 30"x 30"

Figure 3

Compression, 1989
Marble, trunk trees, steel wire
12'x 5'x 4'
Exhibited at Socrates Sculpture Park,
NY, January – May, 1989

Figure 4

Occupied Space, 1998
Clay, earthenware vessel, wood and
polystyrene sheet
25' x 25' x 5'
Installation, III Bienal Barro de América,
May of 1998
Museo Alejandro Otero, Caracas,
Venezuela

Figure 5

Crown, 2000-2002
Leaves and glue
Digital print, edition of 6
32" x 28"
Courtesy of Adriana Schmidt Galerie
Stuttgart, Germany

Figure 6

Mallet, 2000-2002
Flowers, objects and glue
Digital print, edition of 6
32"x28"
Courtesy of Adriana Schmidt Galerie
Stuttgart, Germany

Figure 7

My World, 2003
Plywood, artificial plants and plastic
wheels
9' Diameter
Courtesy of Adriana Schmidt Galerie
Stuttgart, Germany

Figure 8

Imagine...the Possible Island, 2007
Plywood, clay rock, resin, plastic
wheels, artificial plant & flowers
8'x3'x1'

Figure 9

Birth, 2008
Plywood, Styrofoam, Aqua Resin, soil,
artificial plant & flowers
6' x 3' x 1'

Figure 10

Tree, 1998
Steel bar, Plaster of Paris, and bee wax
10' x 7" diameter



FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

The Frost Art Museum receives ongoing support from the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, the Cultural Affairs Council, the Mayor and the Miami-Dade Board of County Commissioners, Miami-Dade County Tourist Development Council, the Steven & Dorothea Green Endowment, Funding Arts Network, the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs, Dade Community Foundation, CitiGroup Foundation, CitiPrivate Bank, Target and the *Friends* of the Frost Art Museum.



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