

# Linking College, culture and community

JEREMY MIKOLAJCZAK

For Jeremy Mikolajczak, the journey to becoming the director of the Miami Dade College Museum of Art + Design began in a lap pool.

“I was a breaststroker,” he says with a hearty laugh, explaining that he studied art at West Virginia University, which offered him a full scholarship to swim for the team. Unlike most museum directors who study art history, Mikolajczak focused on creating art, specializing in painting and prints.

He soon moved from breaststrokes and brushstrokes to organizing exhibitions. As an undergraduate, he began working on curatorial projects. That led to graduate studies in Italy and ultimately an MFA from the University of Florida. A succession of jobs included running a gallery in Chicago and the Gallery of Art & Design at the University of Central Missouri.

It was there that he heard about the opening at Miami Dade College. “I wasn’t actively looking, but I thought, you know, this is an opportunity,” he says. “I loved Miami. I loved the idea of coming to work with this community. It was one of those — ‘I’ll throw my name in.’ ”

Mikolajczak started in October 2011, and four years later he still speaks with a sense of wonder about the job, which included creating a museum in the iconic Freedom Tower. The museum serves both as a link to the city’s past — with memorabilia from the Cuban refugees who were processed at the tower during the 1960s — and as a showcase for the college’s extensive collection, which includes works by Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, Donald Judd and other contemporary stalwarts.

“This is so important,” he says of the museum that opened in 2012. “It’s so much bigger than my own self, my own interests. There’s an importance to the community, and that was really what drew me to come to Miami Dade College. There was an opportunity to really let the arts have a difference here and to really build something.

“It goes hand-in-hand with making a piece of work . . . You don’t want to make a work and have it just sit in a closet or hang in your studio for hours on end. You really want it to communicate with the public. You want to get it out there. That was really important to me, and I was OK with letting the personal aspect of creating work go.”

**NAME:** Jeremy Mikolajczak, 35

**FAVORITE MUSEUM:** Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. “I love how the community interacts with the institution, which includes a library, theatre and center for music research. It is the focal point of the neighborhood, the heart, and as you sit and watch, it is a flurry of schoolchildren, locals and tourists flowing in and out . . . It’s a very democratic place, and I’ve always been fascinated by public education structures.”

**BEST ART EXPERIENCE:** Diego Rivera’s large-scale fresco, *Detroit Industry*, at the Detroit Institute of Art had a profound effect on the Michigan native. “It was the first time I felt empowerment in a work of art.” **PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES TRAINOR JR.**



