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At Miami Dade College, Arnold Mesches retrospective explores circus of modern life

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Arnold Mesches' "Coming Attractions," from 2005, part of the Mesches retrospective at Miami Dade College, Spring 2013.

"I'm still at it," brags painter Arnold Mesches.

For the soon-to-be 90-year-old painter, it's no small triumph. Nor is the citywide retrospective of his work at Miami-Dade College's Museum of Art and Design.

His latest paintings, from an appropriately named *Shock and Awe* series, were finished late last year and give up no ground from a forceful body of work. "I don't like staying in one place," he says. "I have too many things to explore, new things to try all the time."

What Mesches has been exploring over a career that has taken him from Hollywood

to New York — and since 2002, Gainesville, where he is an adjunct professor at the University of Florida — is the precariousness of the human condition.

At the Freedom Tower, *Arnold Mesches: A Life's Work* explores 60 years of his output. Complementary exhibitions at MDC's Wolfson, North and Kendall campus galleries home in on more specialized aspects of his work.

Jeremy Mikolajczak, executive director and chief curator of MOAD, described organizing the shows as "an opportunity to honor" an artist who had been his teacher and mentor at UF. Nearly filling the display space at Freedom Tower, this is the most comprehensive exhibition devoted to Mesches, but he is hardly a stranger to the local art scene. Florida International University's Frost Art Museum in 2010 exhibited work from his *Anomie* series of idiosyncratic history paintings tracing a timeline between 1492 and 2006; Mesches also has exhibited at Dorsch Gallery and will be included in a group show later this season at Zadok Gallery.

The Freedom Tower exhibition ranges from the first painting Mesches exhibited in 1945 to work finished just last December. A thread that runs through the work is what the show's curator, Kim Levin, described as "the society of spectacle." Circuses, amusement parks,

fiery conflagrations, palatial interiors all provide the settings for Mesches' view of the world. "He's the only artist I know who's dealing with it," she says.

The spectacles that Mesches depicts in his large-scale paintings are rarely subtle, but the bold colors, jarring images and impassioned technique are what give his work such power.

In his *Paint* series, he offers up a compendium of his pictorial concepts, bringing together his brushes and paints with Old Masters who have influenced him, such as El Greco and Goya. *Weather Patterns* juxtaposes acrobats performing amidst a lightning storm, a human cannonball hurtling into a cloud bank and clowns on stilts walking through a swamp. In the *Coming Attractions* paintings, sumptuous interiors are filled with skeletons, laundry and images of the downtrodden.

The most recent painting in the exhibition, *Shock and Awe 23*, shows the artist experimenting with a new technique while maintaining his thematic focus. Multiple paintings are, as he puts it, molded together and finished into a single image of a raging fire. "I'm destroying perspective," Mesches says. "There are chairs bigger than cars."

The spectacles that the artist portrays inevitably include conflict.

"Since I was two years old," Mesches says, "all I remember is war, war, war. There's no such thing as peace. It's a frightening world, and I have to do something about it." He concedes that his paintings, unlike television, reach a much smaller community, but says that he wants people who do see them "to question what I'm doing, to bring their own lives into my paintings."

The artist's own life is the subject of work showing at MDC's Kendall Art Gallery. His participation in a 1946 Hollywood trade union strike as well as his illustrations for political magazines caught the attention of the FBI, which kept track of him for a quarter century. Mesches obtained copies of their files through the Freedom of Information Act and turned them into collages — "modern illuminated manuscripts," he calls them — illustrated with images from that era.

Concurrently, the college's North Gallery is showing *Arnold Mesches: Noise*, 10 works that deal with global, urban and political information overload, all simultaneously shouting and vying for attention. This is the first time these works have been exhibited.

A third MDC gallery exhibit is *Arnold Mesches: Minispective* at the Wolfson Campus's Center Gallery. A collection of smaller-scale paintings, drawings and collages created between 1996 and 2002, many of these works are preparatory studies for Mesches' large paintings and offer a glimpse into his artistic practices.

Both Mikolajczak and Levin described Mesches as "an artists' artist," one respected among fellow artists, critics and museum curators, but lesser known to the public.

Says Levin: "This retrospective should rectify that."

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