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MDC galleries reaching 'greater heights' under Mikolajczak

By John Coppola
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Courtesy of Miami Dade College

"I'm not ready yet to say what the future of the Miami-Dade College Gallery system will be," says its new executive director, Jeremy Mikolajczak, but "visitors will definitely see a difference."

Despite that reticence, in the six months since he took over the MDC galleries, Mikolajczak has already started putting his mark on them, and has many projects in mind. These range from reinvigorating the campus galleries to seeking accreditation from the American Association of Museums.

Mikolajczak previously was director and chief curator of the University of Central Missouri Gallery of Art & Design in Kansas City. In announcing his appointment at MDC, Lula Rodriguez, the college's vice president for advancement and external affairs, cited Mikolajczak's efforts "to increase community involvement in the galleries and increase private and public fundraising," goals he hopes to replicate here. Mikolajczak, who also has worked at private galleries and artist spaces, she said, is "the perfect combination of museum experience with attention to academic point of view."

Miami-Dade College President Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón, who back in 2005 started the process of consolidating the campus galleries into a centralized system that would include a museum and permanent collection, added, "One of the most important cultural programs for Miami Dade College is the work of the Art Gallery System. Given our student body and the community we serve, exposure to the visual arts is paramount. It stimulates both creative and critical thought, and helps forge well-rounded students and global citizens. I am very pleased with the work Jeremy has done during his short time here; he has taken the Art Gallery System to even greater heights."

Although he comes to South Florida from the Midwest, Mikolajczak does have ties to the state: He received a Master of Fine Arts in 2007 from the University of Florida in Gainesville, and says he has attended Art Basel "at least half a dozen times." After attending several years ago, he wrote about the event as "a 96-hour adrenaline-filled

bachelor party set on location in a city where inhibitions are leased, money is no object, clothes are minimal and beauty is eminent.”

That description might not necessarily apply to Kansas City, but Mikolajczak does see similarities between the arts communities in both cities: “Dynamic relationships among non-profits, patrons and artists exist in both places, “he says, which “result in a broadening perspective that looks both at local and global art scenes.”

Mikolajczak himself straddles many roles in the art world: He is a curator, writer and multidisciplinary artist as well as an arts administrator.

Building on those community relationships is one of his major goals, and he is looking to collaborate with other local arts organizations. That effort has already resulted in a first-ever collaboration between the gallery system and the Miami International Film Festival, which MDC also sponsors. Mikolajczak had a hand in developing two exhibitions currently on display through April 28 at Freedom Tower, MDC’s exhibition centerpiece. The Doral Chamber of Commerce has committed to supporting gallery programs at MDC’s West Campus. And a just-completed exhibition, *Gender Bender*, at the Wolfson Campus Centre Gallery, drew on works from the Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Study Centre with support from the Mitchell Wolfson Sr. Foundation.

The Freedom Tower exhibitions show the works of Jean Marc Calvet and Felipe Dulzaides. *Invasión* showcases Nicaraguan-French artist Calvet, who was also the subject of a documentary film screened during MIFF. Dulzaides’s *Utopia Posible* is an exploration of the history of the unfinished National Art Schools in Havana; his works were also featured in a film, *Unfinished Spaces*, shown at MIFF.

Calvet’s brightly colored and obsessively detailed paintings are dramatically set off against the cold white walls of the Freedom Tower galleries. The self-taught artist evokes comparisons with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring and can be classified as outsider art, but it is the back story of Calvet’s life and art — bodyguard for movie stars at Cannes, association with mobsters, a drug-induced rage that started him painting as an effort at redemption — that confronts the viewer.

“Through Calvet’s rich and vividly obsessive work, we enter a world that is both dark and light,” Mikolajczak wrote in his catalog essay for the exhibition. “Where we see the pain and struggle of a life gone awry, we also see the playfulness and hope of life anew, full of redemption and opportunity.”

Dulzaides’ multimedia work combines photographs, videos, drawings and installations. “The project is not political,” Mikolajczak says. “It’s an in-depth look at how architecture affects culture and space.”

Dulzaides has more than a casual connection to Miami-Dade College: He is an alumnus and also received a Cintas Fellowship, awarded to Cuban artists living outside Cuba. Last year, MDC became the repository of the Cintas Fellows Collection, which will form an ongoing part of the exhibition schedule at Freedom Tower.

Currently on display is *Minimum/Maximum*, featuring 22 artworks by artists such as José Bedia, Gene Moreno and Carmen Herrera. The show reflects both the minimalist and

geometric styles of contemporary art and, on the other hand, the figurative style and colorful palette of the Caribbean.

Next up in the Cintas Gallery will be Shutter: Selected Photography and Film from the Cintas Foundation Fellowship Collection. With more than 40 works by artists including Luis Gispert and Maria Martinez-Cañas, it reflects the depth of the Cintas collection in still and moving images.

Also in the works at Freedom Tower is a museum-within-a-museum. Utilizing a grant from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, a permanent display will examine the immigrant experience of Cubans, Haitians and other Latin Americans, and underscore the building's past role as a reception center for Cuban refugees.

Among the other changes Mikolajczak says to expect are displays utilizing MDC's permanent collection of some 1,600 works, which includes big names such as Andy Warhol as well as local artists like Naomi Fisher. Mikolajczak expresses a hope that the permanent collection can spark a dialogue with local artists and reconnect them to the MDC galleries.

There's a lot more to the MDC gallery system, however, than just Freedom Tower. With 15,000 feet of wall space — almost three miles — it may be the largest university gallery system in the country, and includes five other galleries and three art spaces.

Since 2007, MDC's North Campus has been home to the Miami International Sculpture Park, featuring large, outdoor works by Alfredo Halegua, Rafael Consuegra, William King and Mario Felipe Almaguer. Additional outdoor sculptures are on display at the Wolfson Campus. The West Campus Art Galley in Doral is currently featuring Real Abstractions, an exhibition by eight Hispanic artists, all but one of whom live and work in the Miami area.

During April, most of the MDC campus galleries will be presenting 2012 Emerging Artists exhibitions, showcasing work by students at the Wolfson, Kendall, InterAmerican, North and Homestead campuses. Associate director for curatorial affairs Wanda Texon is heading up the effort to jump-start the campus galleries and reconnect them to their communities..

Mikolajczak noted that the educational aspect of MDC's galleries was "first and foremost" in his plans for the system, even if those plans are still taking shape. He speculated about how the galleries could be used to retain artists in the community after they complete their academic training, and how to support local artists in the production of new work.

"This is an exciting time to be part of Miami's art scene," Mikolajczak says, sketching an image of new media, fashion, performance and the spoken word being added to the usual offerings of painting and sculpture before he starts listing possibilities for collaborations with Art Basel, local museums, the Miami-Dade public schools and the Miami International Book Fair..

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