

Artist's work explores Everglades, Cuban Missile Crisis

BY RICARDO MOR



A production of Christy Gast's video, *War Drums*. In the videos, drummers seem to be competing with each other, representing the strained relationship between Cuba and the United States during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Gesi Schilling

Those who walk into Design District's Locust Projects gallery will find a surprise hiding behind the blacked-out windows and doors: two large missiles pointed directly at them. Created by local artist Christy Gast, the missiles are part of her solo exhibition *Inholdings*, which concerns the geopolitical and ecological invasions of the Everglades.

Born in Ohio, the artist moved to New York where she received her MFA from Columbia University and developed an artistic practice that "combined performance and object-making and had a lot to do with the mythology of place."

Although Gast is not a Miami native, she has lived here for seven years, and the city places a crucial role in her work. Although Miami's abundance of space and burgeoning art community was one reason she moved here, she says she was most attracted to the city's relationship with nature.

"For me, as an artist whose practice is predicated on having accessibility to natural areas, Miami has this very stark divide between the urban and the Everglades boundaries, which is interesting to me."

Inholdings addresses the artist's fascination with the Hole in the Donut region in the Everglades. The area is a deforested pine rockland that was used as farmland beginning in the 1920s, many years before the establishment of Everglades National Park; the name was coined because the disturbed area was surrounded on all sides by undisturbed land.

For her exhibition, she created two 41-foot-long missiles made out of textiles. The missiles are life-size replicas of Nike Hercules missiles. The menacing immediate imagery we tend to associate with missiles is here contrasted by the visual softness of the fabrics, creating a unique contrast.

While many wouldn't associate the Everglades with warfare, Gast says that it's ingrained in its cultural history. At the height of the

Cuban Missile Crisis, land in the Hole in the Donut was used as a missile base for the military which held Nike Hercules missiles.

Among the textiles on the missiles is a white and green print created by the artist. The imagery represents three different species of plants that have marked the history of the Hole in the Donut. The plants represented in the print include are tomato bushes, which were farmed in the area; Brazilian pepper trees, an invasive species that competed with native species for resources and were later removed; and lovegrass, a native species that has regrown in the areas the pepper trees once grew after their removal.

The other work represented in her show is War Drums, a 23-minute long video which heavily features drum music that the artist wrote. The video takes place in one of the last remaining pine forests in Miami-Dade County and is minimal in its action, with the camera rotating in circles.

The drum music featured prominently in the video is created by two drummers who are standing across from each other, a woman playing Afro-Cuban music on a conga while a military drum corps plays snare cadences. It becomes evident by watching the video that the drummers are almost competing with each other and can represent the strained relationship between Cuba and the United States during the Cuban Missile Crisis. By situating these drummers in the pine forest, Gast comments on the Everglades' history in this conflict.

While Gast manages to condense the messy history of the Hole-in-the-Donut into her exhibition, she believes that the area speaks to the larger narrative of the Everglades and its contentious geopolitical and political past.

The complications of the Everglades are “almost impossible to unravel and this is just a little microcosm of that.”

Also taking place at Locust Projects in the project room is A Fabricated Field, an exhibition Miami-based artist Felice Grodin. For her work, Grodin has created a site-specific installation that features a wooden sub-floor with small “cracks” with small bundles of plywood of varying heights jutting out from the floor and ceiling, creating sharp needle-like structures that resemble stalagmites in a cave.

The work is a major breakthrough for Grodin; the artist who has a background in architecture, normally works with two-dimensional drawings and this work represents the first three-dimensional work that she has created to date.

For Grodin, she believes that the question she wanted to address most with this work was “how do we create an experience that is new but that also addresses the realities that we live in?”

Going through the artist's creation is an interesting experience, as you delicately navigate the uniform cracks within the subfloor as well making sure you avoid hitting the delicate wooden needles jutting throughout the room.

For Locust Projects director Chana Budgazad Sheldon, she says that although it is the first time they have shown two solo shows by women from Miami concurrently, it is more important that both artists are showing works that have pushed themselves as artists.

“Both artists are showing works that are not only strong but are unique from what they have done in the past.”