

## At Miami's Locust Projects, remembrances of Everglades past and present

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“Inholdings,” Installation by Christy Gast, at Locust Projects through April 12, 2014. Chi Lam, Courtesy of Locust Projects:

Back in the duck-and-cover days of the 1960s, the Florida Everglades served as the first line of defense from possible nuclear annihilation. Everglades National Park is home to the former Nike Hercules Missile Site, where young soldiers trained their weapons on Soviet bombers and Cuban fighter planes during the Cuban Missile Crisis that brought east and west to the brink of war.

Miami-based artist Christy Gast revisits this relic from the Cold War in an exhibition titled *Inholdings*, now showing at Locust Projects through April 12. Named for a bureaucratic term applied to privately owned land within a national park, this Andorra of the Everglades had multiple incarnations from pine forest and prairie to farmland and later missile base. Now it is national park land, overrun with nonnative plants. The area – sometimes affectionately called the “Hole-in-the-Donut” – is now the subject of a massive project to rid it of invasive plants, specifically Brazilian pepper.

The exhibition features two full-scale replicas of the 39-foot missiles, suspended from the ceiling and horizontal as if in a hangar. Rather than focus on the rigid fear engendered by the missiles and the unthinkable danger they were created to thwart, Gast rendered the rockets partially flaccid in fabric. But even the fabric has a duality, as it is a military-grade canvas, the kind used for the tents that first housed the soldiers at the old Army base. Adding another nuance, the artist distanced the weapons from war by decorating the fabric with bright green images of vegetation that took root once the soldiers left and the land went to seed.

As if the replicas and an accompanying schematic drawing of the missiles are not enough to awe visitors, Gast completes her exhibit with a panoramic video of one of the few remaining stands of pine forest in Miami-Dade County.

Splashed across a wide screen monitor, the *War Drums* single-channel video features a red-turbaned woman playing the congas to an Afro-Cuban beat that questions and complements the cadence of a military-style snare drum played by a young man dressed in a cadet's uniform. Periodically, the woman moves in an undulating fashion to the snare drummer's responding beat. Reminiscent of movies where a drumbeat signals impending tribal warfare or advancing troops, the video sounds a warning amid the lush tropical

backdrop of the forest. Gast wrote the score and allowed the drummers to add their own voice.

“Basically, what they are doing is improvising,” she said. “They are listening to the forest. Through their particular medium, they are also interpreting the forest. They are also having a conversation with each other.”

The effect is haunting, strangely uplifting and foreboding at the same time. It echoes the theme of the missiles, which, though deadly in nature, embody grace in form. Gast added a dash of cheer with the bright green botanical pattern that she hand printed on the missile’s canvas.

“The plants that I’ve incorporated into the repeating pattern are plants that represent the different eras of use in the Hole-in-the-Donut,” she said. “There are tomatoes and Brazilian pepper and love grass, which is one of the first plants to reemerge after the Brazilian pepper, and all of the land, this dirt from the fields, is scraped away into these huge earthen berms that resemble the berms around the missile base.”

How fitting that a plant named for love would now fill an area once so filled with fear.

## FIELD OF SPIRES

The back room at Locust Projects should not be missed. While Gast’s big-as-life missiles and lush video cannot be ignored, Felice Grodin’s A Fabricated Field resonates with a subtle beauty. Her exhibit is a kin to discovering a sleeper hit on a record’s B-Side.

Though vastly different from Gast’s work in the adjoining room, Grodin’s installation works well with the War Drums soundtrack. It’s almost as if the two shows were designed as companion pieces.

Grodin converted almost the entire back room into an architectural wonderland of wooden spires. Created from thin strips of untreated basswood and mahogany, some of her spires of layered wood extend more than 12 feet from floor to ceiling. They exude an art deco sensibility, but one of the 21st century. Resembling miniature Empire State buildings or perhaps even the cypress knees found in the Everglades, the spires sprout from dowels anchored into the plywood floor or the beamed ceiling. The works on the floor have the added drama of unadorned strips of wood that resemble the tension cables found on bridge spans.

“I never know what it’s going to look like until I’m finished,” Grodin confessed, explaining that the process is organic and can be affected by the surrounding space. Such was the case when she first viewed the Dade County pine rafters in the exposed ceiling at Locust Projects. “I had not originally envisioned that,” she said of the stalactites she created. They balance the varying heights of the works emerging from the floor.

A native of Bologna, Italy, Grodin now lives in Miami Beach, where she created the individual spires before assembling them at the exhibition site. It took some eight months of meticulously gluing the wood strips, one atop the other. The designs that emerged were as much a surprise for the artist as viewer.

“A lot of the designs are looking at patterns in nature,” she said. “The pattern of cypress knees, and not just one, but how they interconnect, the infrastructure of systems that work together.”

Educated at Tulane and Harvard universities, Grodin sounds almost sheepish when explaining that she never practiced architecture. No apology is needed, as her classical training inspires her delicate artistry. The wood she uses is normally reserved for the creation of architectural models. In this exhibit, Grodin goes beyond the simple architecture of human habitation to include a look at space that peeks behind what is normally visible. In essence, she deconstructs architecture to show what is hidden by walls and completed buildings.

“To me, it’s like weaving,” she says of her designs. “How do they connect is the trick.”

The artist invites visitors to walk in and around the structure to get a sense of living in the space. She believes even scuff marks from shoes will add an element that will transform the work. But if you wish to feel at one with the work, you might just want to walk through it barefoot. That way you can enjoy the tactile sensation of the residual sawdust on the plywood floor.