

# Grand Illusion

## MAM's latest spectacle glimmers, glows, and goads.

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Oscar Munoz's shardlike shower curtains.

Details:

"Disappearances, Shadows & Illusions"; Through September 21.

Miami Art Museum, 101 W. Flagler St., Miami;

305-375-3000,

[www.miamiartmuseum.org](http://www.miamiartmuseum.org)

Subject(s):

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Despite the potentially murky bait-and-switch nature of its new show, Miami Art Museum (MAM) delivers an intelligent spectacle of diversity in "Disappearances, Shadows & Illusions." The exhibit, which aspires to challenge traditional notions of how the public views art, features upward of 50 works by more than 20 artists.

"The works in this exhibition run contrary to the expectation that artworks must embody enduring values and stand the test of time," MAM's senior curator Peter Boswell explains. "They use tricks of light, perspective, erasure, and other means to evoke a sense of impermanence and uncertainty. They make us acutely aware of our role as viewers and prompt us to question what we are seeing."

The exhibit includes works from MAM's permanent collection, key loans from local collectors, and several installations commissioned from local artists, who ultimately pocket the show. These include Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova, Kerry Phillips, Matt Schreiber, and Tom Scicluna.

At the entrance, Mark Handforth's *Western Sun* engulfs an entire wall. It is among the museum's newest acquisitions and is making its MAM debut. It was also shown at the 2004 Whitney Biennial.

The work employs ardent red fluorescent light fixtures arranged like sunbeams and gives the appearance that the sun is setting into the museum floor. It casts the surrounding space in a fiery glow and

brings to mind Catherine the Great's glittering amber room looted by the Nazis during World War II.

Not surprisingly, light is a slippery medium many artists adroitly harness here to provoke consideration of what it illuminates as much as what it conceals.

Consider Wendy Wischer's *Ariadne's Thread*, a nod to the Greek myth in which Ariadne gives her lover, Theseus, a ball of string to escape the Minotaur's labyrinth.

Wischer created a stairway to Heaven out of electro-luminescent wire that snakes across the floor of a curtained-off room and rises as far as one can see before vanishing into an inky void. The artist seems to suggest that even in our darkest moments of despair, salvation might be in reach.

Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova infuses a thin sliver of light with subtle meaning in his sly installation. It's easy to miss, and several people on a recent visit unwittingly walked by it.

The aptly titled *A Seemingly Open Door* is just that. Rodriguez-Casanova installed a pristine white door in a museum wall that gives the impression the door is cracked open to an unseen space bathed in blinding light that bleeds into the gallery. Some visitors who discovered it felt

compelled to give the doorknob a tug to see what lay on the other side. They were left hanging when the door wouldn't budge. The piece helps underscore the show's concept that for some of these artists, their works are points of departure rather than mere destinations.

*Guilloche, The Blind Man*, commissioned from Matt Shreiber, evokes a sense of a geometric vortex of St. Elmo's fire.

The laser installation shoots green rays of light in overlapping, spiraling beams, creating what is known as a guilloche pattern. These complex patterns, called spirographs in mathematics, are commonly used on bank notes and currency to prevent forgeries.

A cockamamie opus that left several elderly spectators scratching their noggins is COOPER's shotgun marriage of fiction and reality. Their confusion might have stemmed from his squirrely work's 56-word title — shortened here to *Drainpipes and death myths ...* for practical purposes.

The multipart installation consists of what appear to be props from a performance, snippets of which play on a monitor inside an oddly shaped crate hanging from the rafters.

Nearby on the floor are a bedroll, tissue boxes, a bowl of talcum powder, towels, and a metal stand from which dangles a bathrobe, underwear, and a rubber mask in the likeness of Abraham Lincoln. A sewer-pipe-width 12-foot-long tube — coated inside with what look like desiccated entrails — rounds out the installation.

In the video, a man uses the Kleenex boxes as bedroom slippers. Later, someone dressed like Honest Abe in his unmentionables squirms through what appears to be an endless length of large intestine. At this point, some viewers began to wonder if the curator had snagged the artist with a butterfly net.

The video rolls on, and a tune from *Fiddler on the Roof* breaks out, cranking up the IV drip of tension in the space. The lyrics — "Is this the little girl I carried? Is this the little boy at play? I don't remember growing older. When did they?" — spooked an elderly South American couple. The man identified the singer as Perry Como before the pair skated away.

The funky borscht of actual and fictional events — the performance never really happened — deals with absence, yet another key theme in the show.

Paul Pfeiffer also mines absence in *The Long Count (Thrilla in Manila)*, a postcard-size DVD monitor jutting from a wall on the end of a five-foot length of steel pipe. The artist erased the images of Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier from the footage of their famous 1974 fight in the Philippines, leaving only the images of the rowdy mob at ringside.

Artists Oscar Muñoz and Michael Badura touch upon mortality.

Muñoz's five shower curtains look like versions of the Shroud of Turin. The works were inspired by the violence in his native Colombia, and one of his spectral figures appears to be scrubbing off a nightmare as a pool of blood trickles down the drain.

Poland's Badura is depicted in a series of black-and-white photographs, some of which are covered with earth. In them, the artist gradually disappears, until his visage is scratched out by sun-baked soil.

Kerry Phillips finds new uses for rug remnants in *You could always see real far off even when*

*you weren't trying*, creating a pair of camel hump mounds in the center of the gallery floor.

From the front, the same type of rug atop the entire museum floor covers the top layer of her piece, evoking a sense of an eruption underneath. From the other side, the multicolored variations of carpeting rise to eye level, giving the piece a look of striated, earthen sediment.

Tom Scicluna delivers perhaps the single most cultivated device for absorbing the spirit of this show.

His amazing *Shift* is a freestanding wall that has been almost imperceptibly bent out of shape. Through this simple, elegant gesture, he jackhammers home the point that many walls on which art hangs in museums are only temporary and meant to go unnoticed. Scicluna effectively subverts institutional authority by tinkering with the concept that museums themselves run the illusion game; with *Shift*, the artist has taken over.

Even though MAM tosses a red herring by placing a Bruce Connor drawing on the face of Scicluna's wall-sculpture, one can't help but notice the twisted façade. Like much of this inspired show, Scicluna grabs the viewer with the type of Kryptonite sure to weaken traditionalist scolds.

5