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## MAM's new "Wilderness" exhibition confirms that life is scary out there

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Courtesy David Castillo Gallery

"Caracas in Civic War, 2007" is part of "The Wilderness," a new exhibition at Miami Art Museum. The oil on canvas is by Aramis Gutierrez

Throughout history, the dark corners of the wilderness have served as the physical manifestation of the unknown, a mysterious force echoing the psychic horror show that lurks in the collective unconscious. Our interaction with the natural world remains alternately distant and incestuous, delightful and hideous, pretty much like the rest of our relationships, and contemporary art is always up for any kind of dysfunctional love affair.

Aptly enough, The Wilderness at Miami Art Museum, a new exhibition organized by associate curator Rene Morales, is dominated by the only-in-Florida dysfunction of Allan McCollum's The Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida (with

Supplemental Didactics), 1998. McCollum, a New York-based artist who has done projects such as 1994's The Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah, a recasting of dinosaur tracks, went Deep Florida in the summer of 1997, spending six weeks at the International Center for Lightning Research and Testing at Camp Blanding. At the research complex near Starke, McCollum and the resident scientists fired small rockets trailing thin copper wire into the air. The wire led to containers full of sand. Strikes hitting the sand dead-on often produced fulgurites, glass pieces in the form of a lightning bolt.

McCollum had a local souvenir manufacturer make 10,000 beige copies of fulgurites. In the MAM installation, the sea of almost identical items on an enormous display table blurs into a numbing mass-produced expanse, putting a tailspin on the "authenticity" and perceived value of art objects. On top of a neighboring table are thousands of brightly colored pamphlets, set in neat stacks, with plain, straight-ahead typography echoing the no-nonsense approach of natural-history museums. The titles meander from the jaunty ("Something New in Fulgurites") to the deranged optimism of a younger America ("Starke Became Boomtown USA In The Blanding Era.") to the somber convolution of 19th Century explorers. "References to Lightning in the Holy Bible" contains such chestnuts as "His countenance was like lightning. ..."

Taking in a video that accompanies the piece, a zillion volts vaporizing a container of sand in

Starke, the hot bottom of Earth in summer, McCollum reflects, "I'm interested in how people live with local natural phenomenon, and Camp Blanding is regarded as the lightning capitol of the world. This is a weird state in so many ways."

In an adjacent room is a weird installation by David Brooks, *Still Life with Stampede and Wild Seabirds*, commissioned by MAM. (Brooks also has an epic nature-driven installation up at MoMA-PS I in New York.) Working with the grass-roots Florida Keys Wild Bird Center in Tavernier, Brooks began with the kind of concrete animal sculptures (rearing horses, charging elephants, etc.) that pop up on lawns in the more unfortunate sections of Miami. The sculptures of faux scary beasts were placed inside cages at the Wild Bird refuge, and, after awhile, some rather painterly guano stains had accumulated on them. Then, inspired by a tableau of stuffed and thoroughly tamed angry elephants at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, he reassembled the guano-adorned pieces at MAM, examining the "projection of our ideas of the natural world."

Apart from the installations, the galleries contain some choice work. Aramis Gutierrez, who shows at David Castillo in Miami, contributed the deep, dark oil painting *Caracas in Civil War, 2007*, a lonely bird on a hilltop branch watching the city burn at night. Darren Almond's harrowing video piece, *Arctic Pull, 2003*, consists of a solitary figure dragging a sled in a cold, nasty Siberian gale, the wasteland colonized by one more demented explorer.

Tacita Dean's 1999 film *Banewl* is set in the manicured English countryside and follows a herd of cows as they confront a solar eclipse. One cow, as even humans will in moments of confusion and awe, suddenly begins pointlessly to hump one of his buddies.

Christy Gast, a Florida home girl, traveled to the Utah desert for her three-channel, room-size video installation, *Batty Cave (2010)*. On an art reconnaissance mission, she discovered a once-occupied cave near the circa 1963 Glen Canyon Dam, widely regarded as an environmental disaster.

In the cave, Gast found a half-built, fully deranged ark from the 1950s, built by two hermits seized by sugar-plum visions of the Apocalypse. They hoped to ride out the end time of the Glen Canyon Dam forever. The video images in the installation include the Rube Goldberg ark, abandoned cars and Gast's hands arranging site artifacts into evolving pictograms of an imagined history. The soundtrack, featuring her electronically-modified voice ("C is the cave where we built in the dark...") adds another note of eeriness.

To Gast, the piece is part of the mythic baggage of the American West, once the great American wilderness. "The hopefulness of the hermits, dreaming of riding off into the future in their crazy boat, is kind of romantic, isn't it?"