

## Three Women, Center Stage

Written by Anne Tschida, BT Arts Editor  
September 2018

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### MOCA, PAMM, and the Bass honor local artists

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hat a pleasure it is to see three established Miami-based women receive solo shows, all opening this month in our most prominent museums.

Mira Lehr got her start in New York in the 1960s, in the forefront of abstract art -- a lonely place as a woman in that movement -- and later moved to Miami, where she was inspired by the fragile and unique environment surrounding us in mangroves and marine life. She would call herself an eco-feminist artist. In "Tracing the Red Thread," Lehr has made new works -- some simulating the aquatic and mangrove systems, others paintings, resins, and Japanese paper works -- taking over all the galleries in the newly rejuvenated Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) North Miami.

Lynne Golob Gelfman also began her career in New York as a pioneering female abstract painter, and moved to Miami in 1972. She has remained true to the grid, although in a less rigid form than her contemporaries, and to the physical joy of mark-making and patterning.

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“Grids: A Selection of Paintings” is a survey of pieces created over the past two decades, with a few examples of her earlier works from the late 1960s and early 1970s; they will get their due respect at Pérez Art Museum Miami.

Karen Rifas is Chicago born, and has lived and taught in Miami for decades. “Deceptive Constructions” at the Bass Museum will come as a departure for those familiar with her line/cord and leaf installations; these new paintings are bright and brash, but still deceptive in their spatial manipulation.

These three exhibits were not coordinated, but they signal a change in the air. Generally, our local institutions have not been great at highlighting the quality art being made locally. There have been exceptions, of course: PAMM recently presented a huge show from Dara Friedman and a smaller one from William Cordova; the Bass has displayed public art pieces from Agustina Woodgate, Robert Chambers, and Brookhart Jonquil, among others; and MOCA during its transition period hosted a solo from Edouard Duval Carrié (and under the leadership of Bonnie Clearwater, the museum collected and featured a number of local artists).



But locals have long complained that not enough is being done to promote, and therefore sustain, an arts scene with deep roots. A number of galleries have done a good job, but the institutions have been lagging.

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But now this month, we can see the diversity and scope of three deserving artists. And, it should be noted, three women who once worked in a world where their male counterparts attracted most of the attention; three women who, thankfully, can't be patronized with the clichéd label "young emerging artists."

Up at MOCA, Lehr has made three-dimensional sculptures imitating mangrove roots from marine ropes and steel that will hang from the ceiling. There's a loose connection here to the mythical Ariadne of Crete, daughter of King Minos, who saved Theseus from the labyrinth and the Minotaur by means of a ball of thread. Lehr's mangroves in a sense lead the visitor through the precarious nature -- and uncertain solutions and future dilemmas -- of our environment.

Also hanging from the ceiling: about 50 jellyfish made from resin on Plexiglas. Like the live ones in the ocean, they're translucent and cast shadows from above. Their undersides also suggest danger if you get too close.

On the walls are large works that should be familiar to those who know Lehr's style -- her signature use of ignited gunpowder, burned and dyed Japanese paper, and more resin and acrylic.



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Harking back to her early days, another space is devoted to Buckminster Fuller, the architect, designer, theorist, futurist with whom Lehr studied. This is a reading room, where one can browse the book Lehr wrote after her time with Fuller. From Fuller, she learned of the interconnectedness of human and natural life, where no man or ecosystem is an island unto itself.

As the museum summarizes in the introduction to the exhibit: “Lehr creates a mysterious world whose seductive beauty reminds us not only of the gifts that nature gives us, but of the importance of preserving them for the future generations.”

Lynne Golob Gelfman adheres closer to the grid, the underpinning of much of modern, abstract and 20th-century art, but she too became mesmerized by the Miami light, water, sand, and unique environment. The dimmer light and dense urban setting back in New York wasn't compatible with what she was experiencing here. Rather than diffused northern light, she could see that the bright sun in fact has a bleaching effect.

One day she observed that the sun had bleached the front of a grid painting, making the paint seep through the canvas to the back side. This would be a transforming event in the process of her art-making, in which she started to paint the front but then let the now somewhat blurred, distorted geometric patterns become the new face of the work she would display.

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