

Little Haiti artist Eddie Arroyo heads to New York



The Whitney Museum made its name featuring the works of contemporary American artists, and its Biennial (which began as an annual event in 1932 but switched to every two years in 1973) is one of the most prestigious art shows in the world. The Biennial features works created just within the previous two years, and mostly by emerging U.S. artists who are, for the most part, under 40 years old.

Of the 75 artists invited to participate in the 2019 Biennial, two are from Miami -- Agustina Woodgate and Eddie Arroyo, both represented by the innovative gallery Spinello Projects.

In past years, other Miamians singled out for the Whitney Biennial have included Robert Thiele (1975) and William Cordova and Adler Guerrier (both in 2008). But in a literal sense, Arroyo may be the most representative of our city so far.

This year's Biennial's key themes include "the mining of history in order to reimagine the present or future, a profound and sustained consideration of questions of equity along financial, racial, and sexual lines." And Arroyo is indeed mining history: he paints actual buildings and structures in Miami, and in particular, those of Little Haiti -- the fast-disappearing, family-run storefronts, restaurants, and botánicas, all victims of the gentrification that is rapidly gobbling up this neighborhood.

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Documenting these structures is Arroyo's mission and passion.

Three of the five paintings chosen for the Whitney are of the iconic (now closed) Café Creole on NE 2nd Avenue, whose walls were covered in bright tropical oranges and yellows. On one of those walls was a mural from Serge Toussaint, the artist sometimes known as the muralist of Little Haiti.

Arroyo painted the Café Creole mural of Mecca, the Haitian rapper and poet, dressed in military garb, both as the mural would have looked originally, then as it later appeared, defaced. Today the mural is completely gone.

He has also painted the far more nondescript buildings replacing these businesses, places that now, needless to say, don't usually have black or brown owners.

Arroyo is not quiet about the activism involved in his art, which he talks about from his home/studio on NW 2nd Avenue. He knows that having his work in an elite biennial such as the Whitney's makes him part of an art world that can be exploited to gentrify neighborhoods, and this is something he's fighting against.

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But he acknowledges that that he's pleased and privileged to join the ranks of other influential winners of the past, and of local community activists, such as William Cordova and Adler Guerrier, whose artworks are very different from Arroyo's, but who are also committed to social change.



Some would consider Arroyo's work as much documentation as fine art, but he has been in pursuit of both since graduating with a degree in fine arts from FIU in 2001. It was then that he picked up a camera and became a familiar face at the galleries in the nascent art center of Wynwood. He eventually began to write about what he was seeing -- the emerging artists and the fast-changing nature of Wynwood -- for various blogs. He pointed his camera at the periphery, at the Design District (which he calls the Luxury District), and then to Little Haiti.

He feared that the poorer, more residential neighborhood of Little Haiti would find it hard to withstand the onslaught of developers, and his fears were not unfounded. So part of his practice became preserving the memories and history of the city, especially those areas with few resources to do such a thing themselves -- "to record the community and culture," as he puts it. Muralists like Toussaint, who mixed art and activism and left paint on buildings and signs, in a sense to mark both the realities and memories of a place, were an inspiration.

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Arroyo, the son of Peruvian and Colombian immigrants, had his first solo painting show in 2010, and also has been in numerous group shows at such locations as the Little Haiti Cultural Center, Florida Atlantic University's Ritter Gallery, the Frost Art Museum FIU, the Bakehouse Art Complex, Swampspace, and Bridge Red.



While not abstract, his paintings can feel embellished by the prominent skies that frame them. These are rarely clear, midday sunny skies, but rather skies with white kinetic clouds or skies at dusk that lend the works a dreamy look.

In his studio, several of the paintings depict signs, the hand-scribbled and tell-tale marks of a working-class neighborhood that may be under siege. One sign reads, "restaurant space for lease." One on its way to the Whitney is a community callout, *Speak Early/Speak Loud/Speak Proud*, in opposition to the Magic City Innovation District development.

Arroyo is not oblivious to the fact that gentrification is almost an inevitable in today's real estate climate, especially with Little Haiti's proximity to downtown, Wynwood, and the Design District. But he does object to how the process transpires.

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For instance, everyone applauds the idea of galleries now owning their spaces, buffering them from the development cycle in which the developers promote their projects by inviting artists and galleries to lease space at deep discounts. Then when the projects take off and property values spike, they no longer need the artists, who are pushed out by rising rents. Owning a studios, house, or gallery can ensure greater stability.



Arroyo sees a downside as well. New owners, including art institutions, no matter how well-intentioned, want their new properties to be surrounded by up-and-coming businesses -- not necessarily Laundromats and mom-and-pop stores. And as property values increase, so do rents and property taxes, leading more unemployment, evictions, and a loss of the neighborhood's social fabric.

The new white or slate-gray buildings that Arroyo also paints are bland, generic spaces, he says. And he has a point -- lovers of Miami's diversity will miss the botánicas, the fruit carts, the

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music always emanating from the storefronts.

But Arroyo knows that neighborhoods change. He points out that Little Haiti only transformed after the big Haitian migrations of the 1980s; before then, it was predominantly African American. It's just that the breakneck speed of redevelopment, especially after the arrival of Art Basel, is leaving others needlessly in the dust, along with their memories.

Turning his attention to the hand the feeds him for the moment, Arroyo says he's excited about the Biennial, which runs from May 17 through September. When he's there for the opening, he'll soak up the arts and the arts activism. And then the homeboy will return and continue to poke his finger in the eye of the moneyed, through painting and writing and his continuous travels through disenfranchised Miami.

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