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Experimental Miami artist brings 'trial-and-error' art to PAMM



BY RICARDO MOR

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Few artists in Miami are as experimental as Nicolas Lobo, a native who has risen to the upper echelons of the city's arts community through a genre-breaking, process-driven practice that has earned him a solo project gallery show at the Pérez Art Museum Miami.

Although his work has gravitated toward sculpture, it is experimental in nature and has included custom iPhone apps, distorted pre-recorded sounds and vats of knockoff perfumes dispersed through the streets of downtown Miami. He even sprayed grape syrup onto the walls of a gallery. While these might sound perplexing to the casual observer, it's not for nothing.

Son of a scientist and a with experience in film special effects, Lobo has a way of experimenting with unusual methods to create work much in the way a chemist might behave in a laboratory. His works explore the tensions between man and the natural and manufactured world.

In his most recent show, “Bad Soda/Soft Drunk” at Gallery Diet in Wynwood, the artist salvaged tens of thousands of bottles of Nexcite, a discontinued Swedish soft drink that claimed to have sexual enhancing properties, from an Opa-locka warehouse. He laid out the cases across the gallery's floor space, asking visitors to walk on top of the sealed cases. The drink cases shared the space with sculptures made out of homemade (and stabilized) napalm and Play-Doh constructed to resemble porous oolite, a common sedimentary rock found locally.

In much of Lobo's work, the artist is preoccupied with the question of what gets prioritized when showcasing art. “Is it the experience in the gallery, the narrative or the process [that comes first]?” he asks himself.

For his solo show at PAMM, Lobo is making a splash in one of the museum's project galleries with an exhibition centered around one of our most popular recreational venues: the pool.

Just by viewing the exhibition, few would guess that it concerns pools at all. The show features several mixed-media sculptures, with much of the focus on the two rows of grey and pink concrete rings at the gallery's center and two wall sculptures adorned in carbon fiber wrapped in fabric. The only immediate hint at pool culture are the flip flops affixed to the concrete rings.

The show draws on Lobo's interests in the private pool as a place of leisure for the affluent and its relationship to the larger water infrastructure in South Florida. He draws connections to the demands pools place on our water systems — an issue that has recently drawn national attention as severe droughts in California force cutbacks in their water usage, particularly in wealthy communities like Beverly Hills where private swimming pools are de rigeur.

The concrete rings at the gallery's center are scale models of storm drain components that not only connect private pools to public infrastructure but also help alleviate massive flooding — an issue likely to become more critical with sea level rise.

The exhibition itself was created in a pool — specifically, the private pool of Lobo’s gallerist Nina Johnson-Milewski and her husband Dan Milewski. The artist spent three months in the backyard of the couple’s historic Shorecrest home, experimenting on different methods including several processes that proved unsuccessful. Johnson-Milewski, who has represented the artist at Gallery Diet since 2013, says the experience of having Lobo occupy her pool was “fun, terrifying and tremendously rewarding.”

Lobo’s trial-and-error methods were pushed to the limits in the construction of the works for the PAMM show, particularly when a mix of volatile chemicals created an explosive reaction that damaged his below-ground pool-workspace. Fortunately for Johnson-Milewski, she was aware of the risks involved with Lobo’s process and had plans to renovate the pool anyway.

Along the upper rim of the gallery, the artist has etched a nearly invisible border using hydrochloric acid, which is commonly used to lower the pH level of pools (and which the artist also notes is found naturally in our gastrointestinal systems). The border is in the image of the twisting Turkish river Meander, often used as a classical geometric pattern.

Lobo also draws from Greek imagery with the use of a large round element etched with the image of Medusa. The sculpture resembles a jumbo-sized pill version of a strain of the club drug Ecstasy. Both the Medusa and the Meander imagery are often associated with the Italian luxury fashion house Versace, whose founding designer famously lived in an Ocean Drive mansion utilizing these images, most prominently along the mansion’s ornately tiled pool.

“Looking at *The Leisure Pit*, the connections between swimming pools, industrial drainage systems and a culture that perpetuates leisure come together so beautifully,” said Johnson-Milewski.

Lobo will be debuting a solo show at the November opening of Gallery Diet’s new gallery space in the Little Haiti neighborhood. The show, writes the gallery, promises to “continue Lobo’s investigation of the porous boundary between the body and the chemical makeup of consumer objects.”

IF YOU GO

“Nicolas Lobo: The Leisure Pit at Perez Art Museum Miami,” through Dec. 13.

Where: Pérez Art Museum Miami, 1103 Biscayne Blvd., downtown

Info: pamm.org; 305-375-3000

Closed: Monday. Admission: Adults, \$16; students and seniors, \$12; under 7 and members free
Free admission for Florida K-12 teachers and Miami-based artists; free admission for all on First Thursday and Second Saturdays

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