

Better Living Through Chemistry

A Miami native sculpts the city's strange present

BY HUNTER BRAITHWAITE

"IT'S A HEAVILY DILUTED broth the human body soaks in for leisure," says Nicolas Lobo of muriatic acid, a common swimming pool cleaner that he will use to scar the concrete walls of the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) for "Leisure Pit," an exhibition opening April 16. "But if it were any more concentrated, it would dissolve that human body instantly." This is not the first time the Miami-based artist has made art using a household chemical. Over the years he has used homemade napalm, clouds of Robitussin sprayed from a fire extinguisher, bootleg perfume, and expired energy drinks with purported aphrodisiac qualities. This is a man who once made soy sauce out of his own hair.

Lobo keeps a studio in Miami's Little River neighborhood not far from the home and jungled garden he shares with his

partner, Muriel, an organic farmer, and their toddler, Bimini. Raised in the city's southern suburbs, he returned to Miami after graduating from Cooper Union in New York and spending a year in San Francisco. "I'm here because I can make my best work here," Lobo says. "It's a city with an expiration date, it's a new city that has grown way too fast for its own good."

Miami's troubled identity as a tourist town built atop a crumbling ecology is a source of rich contemplation for Lobo, whose art functions as models and conceptual screen grabs of this accelerated culture in crisis. He often gives static shape to regionally specific concepts of motion, as with his 2008 sculpture *Glide Slope*, a three-dimensional rendering of the FAA-approved flight path into Miami International Airport, sculpted out



FROM TOP:
Materials from
A rebours/
Against nature,
2014, including
perfume,
electronics,
and misting
system.

Lobo in Miami,
2014.

of condo-countertop, go-to terrazzo. Sometimes the movement he hijacks and reroutes is more about commercial circulation. In 2013, while wandering the nearby neighborhood of Opa-locka in search of a new studio, Lobo came upon a building filled with shipping pallets loaded with cases of Nexcite, an antifreeze-blue energy drink with purported aphrodisiac qualities that had been briefly marketed in local strip clubs before being discontinued. "It was full floor to ceiling, right up to the door. You could barely get in."

Lobo didn't rent the building, but he did take the soda: He used 69,000 bottles to completely re-floor Gallery Diet, the Wynwood space that represents

"Miami is a city with an expiration date, a new city that's grown way too fast for its own good."

him. For that exhibition, "Bad Soda/ Soft Drunk," Lobo also installed several sculptures modeled on scholar stones. Made from Styrofoam "melted" with gasoline (a latchkey equivalent of napalm) and coated in Play-Doh, the sculptures have a contemplative presence that overpowers their disposable, violent materiality. Some are additionally dyed with Nexcite. Viewers were encouraged to walk through the space as they would a Chinese garden, stepping cautiously atop the bottles of energy drink. Lobo closed the show after only two weeks to emphasize the similarities in disparate networks: on the one hand, sculptures in a gallery show; on the other, bottles of expired sugar water sweltering in a warehouse.

This past fall, as part of Miami's temporary public art program Fringe Projects, Lobo updated J.K. Huysmans' classic novel *A rebours* with a performative piece incorporating a 50-gallon drum of fake perfume, emptying its pungent contents onto a busy Miami street once an hour for seven days. "The idea was to take the premise of the book and then reverse it," Lobo says. "Instead of a highly controlled, private lab to

conduct aesthetic experiments, I turned it inside out and did it in a public setting." To highlight the ersatz decadence of the city, he purchased hundreds of perfume bottles from wholesale vendors in the neighborhood and diluted them with enough distilled water to fill the barrel. "I gravitated toward celebrity knockoff perfumes. I thought it was interesting to be an impersonation of an impersonation."

For his upcoming show at PAMM, Lobo uses the typical backyard in-ground swimming pool as a factory for a series of sculptures. The process is simple. First, a mold is filled with concrete mix. Then Lobo encases it in a layer of spandex and submerges it in the pool.

The spandex allows the water to enter while keeping the concrete in place. After a few days, the piece is removed and allowed to harden on the pool deck. Ultimately, the sculptures will be displayed along with their molds in a muriatic-acid-scarred gallery. By using an international symbol of leisure as a site of industrial production, Lobo comments on the precariousness and paradoxical nature of an artist's functioning in Miami's tourist economy.

One of the sculptures is a three-foot-diameter version of the Versace Medusa head logo, which has resonance with everything from jet-set Italian couture to rap culture to Greek myth. Lobo is drawn to the way the image has traveled through time, how Medusa is "the object of visual attraction that leaves the viewer paralyzed." There's an additional twist: The exact image Lobo cast is derived from one of numerous "branded" ecstasy pills readily found in Miami clubs. It's a fitting reference, since Lobo looks to the synthesis of designer drugs as an analogy for artmaking: Both chemists and artists tweak existing formulas, creating new bonds or dissolving old ones to produce the desired feeling. **MP**



Napalm stone (Nexcite version #2), 2014. Napalm, Play-Doh, terrazzo, Nexcite, 72 x 20 x 20 in.