

[Barbara Neijna's extraordinary 'Foreverglades' at Miami International Airport wins prestigious award](#)

BY BETH DUNLOP Special to The Miami Herald

The vast, compelling work of art celebrates one of the world's great miracles — the slow-moving “river of grass” we call the Everglades. But the art, which fills much of Miami International Airport's Concourse J, is in many ways a miracle on its own. Barbara Neijna's Foreverglades is one of the largest public-art projects ever built, covering floors and walls of two floors of the concourse, filling it with words and images, color and light — and even more, perhaps, with insight and inspiration.

On Friday, Neijna and Foreverglades received the first-ever international Art and Work Award for a project in the built environment, an award of such magnitude that other finalists included the city of London and Royal Dutch Telecom. The award was announced at the 2010 World Architecture Conference in Barcelona. It's an extraordinary honor for an extraordinary accomplishment.

Some 10 years in the making, Foreverglades is simultaneously poetic and powerful — art about the extraordinary and intricate beauty of the natural environment. But it is also Neijna's ode to a book, the profound and beautiful *The Everglades: River of Grass*, the seminal 1947 masterwork by Miami's Marjory Stoneman Douglas. Her words are engraved at the beginning of the book (and into the terrazzo floor at the beginning of the concourse): “There are no other Everglades in the world. They are, they always have been, one of the unique regions of the earth. Remote, never wholly known. Nothing anywhere else is like them, their vast glittering openness, wider than the enormous visible round of the horizon.”

The words are set into the floor as if they were contemporary poetry, some of the type larger and some smaller. Other passages appear on glass panels set in front of brilliant-hued backlit photography, closeups of the grasses of the 'Glades rendered as brilliant and profound as the windows of a cathedral. And on the upper floor — closed to all but those going through Customs — the story is told in single words, still set into the floor — incoming, unseen, dark. “The last word is ‘life,’” Neijna says, “and the word in the space before that is ‘miracle.’”

For Neijna, Foreverglades represents much more than a labor of love; rather it is a labor of life. She is an internationally regarded public artist, a sculptor and photographer whose work is often of monumental scale, and yet — as Foreverglades shows — she is utterly sensitive to the smallest nuances, to the intimate minutia of the environment and the vulnerability of it all.

“I've been involved with the environment in my work for many years,” she says. On the walls of her Coconut Grove house are photographs, hers, that at a glance seem to be explorations of form and beauty and on closer examination turn out to be startling examinations of putrid waters in Mexico — art with a message.

A message: And there clearly is a message to Foreverglades. Start with the name, which can be read in more than one way: For-Everglades? Forever-glades? It is both a testimonial to the enduring, empowering quality of the environment and a plea to protect it, forever. The first hint that there is

something amazing underfoot — and before our eyes — comes just at the entrance to the concourse where Neijna has crafted a single “blade of grass” in terrazzo, gradated stripes of blue turning into green. The blue-green blade leads travelers into the concourse and in turn, onto the dark sparkling terrazzo emblazoned with text that moves from one end of the concourse to the other. That blue-green blade re-emerges at the far end of the concourse, somehow completing the thought.

The concourse — part of MIA’s new South Terminal — was designed by Carlos Zapata in conjunction with MGE Architects of Coral Gables. Zapata, whose architectural practice is now in New York, gained recognition early in his career while based in Miami for his design for the sleek Publix by the Bay as well as an award-winning house in Golden Beach. The concourse is likewise a sleek offering — especially when seen on approach from an airplane — but its interior is really given over to the tour de force that is Foreverglades. It is part of the airport’s ambitious program that embraces Art in Public Places (a percent of the construction budget goes to permanent art) and rotating galleries.

Neijna did plans, structural design, even the hardware along with all of the photography that is transformed into windows and small, unexpected tile-sized inserts in the floor, a total of 250. The concourse includes 4,500 linear feet of photography, details blown up many hundreds of times to a point of imposing abstraction and expressed in glass panels that range up to 60 feet long.

The large photographs are set into cast stone wall panels imprinted with wave patterns, shells, leaves, grasses, bark, rock, along with random “found” objects. Some have drawings, in pencil or graphite, as if they were hieroglyphs. There are 1,400 such panels, and none are the same. Thin horizontal bands of photographs divide the wall panels in a narrow burst of color.

When Neijna began the project, she thought she might just use a quotation or two from *River of Grass*, but the book’s current publisher (Pineapple Press of Sarasota) told her to use as much as she wanted. Thus words and images intertwined. “In fact,” observed retired Miami Herald art critic Helen Kohen, “it is actually the product of two artists, Neijna and the writer Marjory Stoneman Douglas (1890-1998), both poets, both leaving permanent impressions on our culture and the physical world.”

2007 critique

Kohen critiqued the piece when it was completed in 2007, saying that “ Foreverglades has an encroaching and enveloping narrative power. You are immersed in the tropics within its confines, feeling the fragility of the environment, exposing yourself — perhaps unwittingly at first — to the geological history of its most vulnerable and most necessary body of watery grasslands.”

History links past to present, and clearly in recent decades the Everglades has faced threats from a host of sources, polluting agricultural runoffs to the ever-menacing and life-defying urban sprawl. From the loss of our water supply to the diminution of the world’s bird population, the ecosystem that begins in the river of grass seems to hang in some jeopardy always.

Passengers can follow the lyrical text as they walk the concourse. The final quoted passage reads “Perhaps even in this last hour, in a new relation of usefulness and beauty, the vast magnificent, subtle and unique region of the Everglades may not be utterly lost.”

It’s all there, transformed from life to art, to life-giving art: Foreverglades into multiple dimensions — visceral, cerebral, aesthetic, tactile, intuitive and more. “It’s a plea for help, a plea for awareness,” Neijna says, “but at the same time, it’s a work of art and art for art’s sake.”

Read more: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/11/07/v-print/1912687/barbara-neijnas-extraordinary.html#ixzz14hRD0cST>