

Art at Miami International Airport adds a cultural dimension to travel

By Celeste Fraser Delgado



Art at Miami International Airport: "100 Latinos/Miami," located in the north terminal near gate D-26, is a project that identifies and recognizes a group of individuals from a variety of professional backgrounds and age groups in the South Florida area, who have contributed to the economic, social and cultural development of the region.

The little girl looks to be about 6 years old. She is hopping on one foot, landing first on a piece of coral, then on a sea anemone, then a starfish, and so on, all outlined in bronze and embedded in the floor of Terminal D at Miami

International Airport. She could hop across this black terrazzo sea flecked with bits of mother-of-pearl for half a mile, if only her mother would let her.

"I wish I had a camera," exclaims Yolanda Sanchez. She is leading a writer on a tour of MIA's art exhibits and public artworks. Sanchez has been the director of fine art and cultural affairs at the airport since 1995, the same year that installation began on Michele Oka Doner's floor, *A Walk on the Beach*.

"Michele would love this," Sanchez smiles, watching the girl.

Then she continues the tour, describing what *A Walk on the Beach* will look like after it is refurbished in the coming months.

Though the floor is only 15 years old, the 37 million people who trudge through the airport every year take a toll. The process will be slow — it's not scheduled for completion until January — because the epoxy terrazzo must be hand-buffed by a team of three. And those three people will only be able to work three hours a night, the only time each day that Terminal D is closed to passengers.

That's a short-term project for Sanchez. A working artist herself, with a master of fine arts degree from Yale, she originally joined the airport as a liaison to the county's Art in Public Places program, which sets aside 1.5 percent of construction costs on all county

projects for public art. With the most recent airport expansion costing \$5.2 billion, that program alone is enough to keep an ambitious arts manager busy.

Yet in May 1999, Sanchez introduced the first rotating exhibition at the airport.

The efforts have paid off: Miami International's Fine Arts & Cultural Affairs division won first place in the Airports Council International North America competition for Customer Service Initiatives that significantly improve the travel experience.

The airport partnered with the arts education program of the county's public schools to curate the first exhibition of artwork by students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Now there are three to four such exhibitions every year, each organized around a theme.

"Just look at this composition," says Sanchez, gesturing toward a drawing by a fourth-grader. She praises the placement of a central dancing figure in what appears to be West African traditional dress, flanked by two similarly dressed figures, each only partially visible in the frame. "That's marvelous."

Now known as the Children's Connector Gallery — located, as the name suggests, in a long corridor connecting Concourses D and E — this was the first of four galleries Sanchez has introduced in her tenure at the airport.

In September 1999, a group show featuring eight Miami artists inaugurated the Central Gallery, dedicated to contemporary art, in Concourse E. Originally a walled-in room, the gallery had to be reconfigured in 2006 after the position for a full-time attendant was eliminated from the airport budget. Walls were removed and enormous glass display cases were built in their place, allowing for the artwork to be exhibited without the risk of vandalism or theft.

Sanchez gestures through a glass case at one of the enormous quilts in Amy Vigilante's solo show, *Seven Minutes in Heaven*. It takes a bit of squinting to see across the four or five feet between the viewer and the wall at the back of the case where the quilt hangs, but sure enough, there are enormous stitches looping and zigzagging across the fabric that the artist refers to as her "hurricane tracks."

Sanchez is just as interested in the details of the woven baskets in the Hand-Made Gallery in Terminal J. She tells how Rwandan widows revived this tradition, renaming their elegant black-and-white baskets "peace baskets," as surviving Hutu and Tutsi women now weave side by side.

"It took eight years for us to put together this show," Sanchez says proudly, pointing to the long list of sponsors who made the exhibit possible.

In contrast to the multimillion dollar Art in Public Places budget, Sanchez estimates that her budget for all of the rotating exhibitions is roughly \$90,000. She solicits potential sponsors for additional funding. Sanchez and her assistant Carolina Salazar rely on an outside jury to select the featured professional artists, with a panel of three choosing 14 artists out of 34 applicants for a variety of exhibitions in the next two years. And

Sanchez seems to have put good use to the doctorate in psychology she earned at FIU in 1979, convincing the airport administration that fine art is as essential a part of airport operations as baggage or security.

Maintenance staff installs the exhibits, whether that means sliding student artwork under glass or arranging to turn off the ceiling alarms after hours to hang a mobile 18 feet overhead. The signage department prints captions for rotating exhibits. The graphic design team collaborates with Sanchez on producing catalogs and postcards. The audio-visual department helps set up video installations and the sound system for concerts, part of a performing arts series Salazar hopes to expand.

Still, there are details to stay on top of. Someone has shoved a row of seats and a couple of signs against the wall beneath an exhibit of photos of bathers in Miami Beach in the 1920s, reproductions of photos from History Miami. These are on display as part of the Community Projects exhibits, begun in 2005 to showcase Miami nonprofits such as the Miami Museum of Art, the Miami Science Museum, the Everglades Park Service and Best Buddies.

Sanchez and Salazar drag the errant signage and seating out of the way and lean them against a nearby wall.

"These are the light ones," Sanchez says gratefully. "The new ones are too heavy for us to move."

Later, she is dismayed to see passengers at Gate D-25 sitting in chairs directly beneath Rogelio Lopez Marin's series Photographs of New York City in the Camera Works Photo Gallery. Sanchez would never disturb a passenger, but when she is a safe distance, she says softly to herself, "There aren't supposed to be any chairs under the artwork."

Back on the tour, Sanchez is in good spirits again. She pauses in front of a blank wall to announce that soon there will be a set of small glass cases built into it, allowing for objects and sculptures too small to be seen in the large cases of the Central Gallery.

Sanchez and Salazar are always on the lookout for new space, interrupting the tour several times to point out possibilities to each other. In one concourse, the demolition of a store has left a deep cubbyhole that would be perfect for a permanent installation. In another, there is a new expanse near an elevator.

The fine arts program is always in competition with potential advertising for space. But where ads bring in revenue, Sanchez believes that art yields its own rewards.

"The terminals need to be humanized," she says. "Our mission is to provide entertainment for passengers and opportunities to be soothed a little bit."

As the tour ends, Salazar stops in front of an abandoned atrium that runs alongside a moving walkway. Someday there will be an outdoor sculpture garden here, she says, with rotating sculptures and plants maintained by Fairchild Tropical Botanic Gardens. This has been on Salazar's wish list for years, but just this month the project has made

an important stride: the money was budgeted to reinforce the floor to bear the weight of the garden. Now all that is needed is a sponsor to pay for the planting.

No leads yet, but Salazar is not worried. "I'm persistent," she says.

Lucky for weary travelers that she is.

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