





# ART SMART



How Jorge Pérez hopes to transform cities with art—starting with Miami

BY SUSIE STANTON STARKOS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JERRY RABINOWITZ

Sometimes called Miami's "coco king," real estate developer, philanthropist, and art collector Jorge Pérez is passionate about art and its traditions. Art, he says, is just part of his life. But his life's work is making it part of Miami's cultural life, as well.

"I've been collecting art for upwards of about 50 years, since I was a college student in Long Island," Pérez recalls. Back then, Pérez and like-minded friends would pile into an old car and go into New York City on weekends to explore the museums and the galleries down in SoHo. "With a few dollars I would try





to buy limited-edition prints that in those days were inexpensive, but by very good artists, which I still have."

"Art became very important," he explains. "As I started developing and started to become more successful and economically able, I started to make art not only part of my life but also for the communities that I first built, and then the neighborhoods and the city around those communities."

Even when he moved to Miami in 1976 after graduate school at the University of Michigan, Pérez continued to build his collection. "I started to collect Latin American art because I wanted to feel close to my roots. I was staying in the United States, and I wanted to continue to have that relationship with the Latin American culture from the countries that I was brought up in."

Pérez began to recognize that immigrants from a number of Latin American countries were making Miami their home. "If we were truly going to become the capital of the Americas and the epicenter of the Latin American world, it was imperative for Miami to have a very, very important Latin American art collection that would make the city not just focused on tourism but on culture and art, so that people from Latin America who were buying condominiums in Miami would have a home away from home in the cultural sense. That's why Latin American art became important for the city and that's when it was important for me to make a

**ABOVE: JOSÉ MANUEL FORT'S** *Columnas Hechas de Piedra, Papel, and Hoja*, Wifredo Lam's *Untitled*, ca. 1950, **JUAN CARLOS BARTLETT'S** *In the Garden*, 1950.

**RIGHT: EN LA AUTOMÓVIL NO HAY LÍNEAS** *Rectos* by **SALVADOR GARRIGA**, **SALVADOR DADA'S** *Untitled*, ca. 1950, **WIFREDO LAM'S** *San Cristóbal*, **ARACDIO DE LAS MARCHAS**.





Luciano Marzulli's  
dining room  
features a large  
wooden table  
with a glass  
candle holder  
in the center.

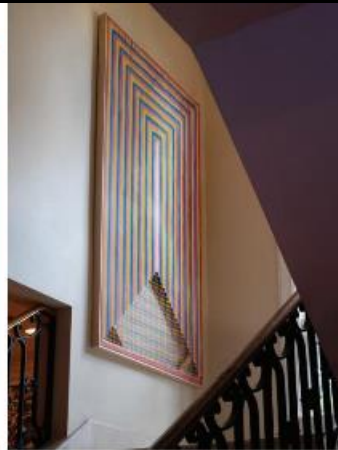


**ABOVE:** PÉREZ MAL-  
LÉY'S JACQUES-  
CHARENTON,  
JOPPA'S MARINA,  
JULIO LE PAREC'S  
YELLOW  
**VERTICAL:** WAO-  
TU, LEFT; RUBEN  
TORRES' 'DANCE,'  
THE FINEST ART  
COLLECTOR OF  
THEM ALL.

contribution to that."

To that end, Pérez donated 95 percent of his collection of Latin American art to the Miami Art Museum that now bears his name. He says the donation freed him up to look more seriously at abstract expressionism and European colorist painters that he had always loved. Later, the discovery of contemporary art in Africa was a revelation.

"We went on a safari to South Africa and visited the museums in Johannesburg and Cape Town. I saw huge similarities between Latin America and Africa in that they were colonized by Europeans, producing terrible results, including slavery and almost the killing of the culture," he recalls. "I saw the incredible emerging art coming out of Africa, which reminded me a lot of Latin American art," he says, noting the connection he sees among the works of African-American artists, Afro-Cuban artists, and Afro-Brazilian artists. "Those three continents were centers of the slave trade," he says. "I really became enamored by the artists and the art that was being produced." Since then Pérez



has gone to South Africa and other African countries many times to buy African contemporary art and visit artists' studios. Pérez notes that a lot of the work centers around the same social issues that Latino American artists talk about: colonialism, sexism, exploitation, and slavery. "All those issues were deeply reflected there in beautiful photography and videos, paintings, and installations and sculptures," he says. "I was just hooked, and I have built what I think is a very important African contemporary collection."

Much of Pérez's collection is on display in Miami—a city that Pérez refers to as the "capital of the Americas." Both the Pérez Art Museum Miami (known as PAMM) and El Espacio 23 (EE23)—a private, 30,000-square-foot gallery space in Allapattah—carry works from his impressive art collection.

But exhibiting art for the public to enjoy isn't the only way that Pérez is transforming the Magic City. There's also the Jorge M. Pérez Family Foundation. Part of its philanthropic commitment is advancing the national arts and culture ecosystem. Another aim supports cul-

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: PÉREZ HALLEY'S *ACTORES* AND JULIO LE PARE'S *YOUNG MAN*; VERTICAL; GONZALO GARCÍA SANCHEZ'S *UNTITLED*, FROM THE SERIES OF *PLANTING THAT ARE RATHER BORN DEAD*; FRANK STALLER'S *SCANDALS*; DESCENDING GREEN YELLOW; *DESCENDING SECTION*.

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:  
HELLEN FRIEDRICHSMAN'S  
"MAYALLA BOGOLINO"  
MORALEJO UNLIMITED  
PICTURES ABOVE KITCHEN  
CABINETS. SPECIAL STUDY BY  
ABDOLLAH CHARRAHOUBA  
(AROUCHA)



tural and educational needs in minority and economically distressed communities in the Miami area. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen the foundation step up its level of giving to individuals who lost jobs and partnered with the school board to provide families with the necessary internet connections for distance learning.

From the time Pérez first observed art in public spaces while traveling in Europe as a young man, he has embraced this concept and has replicated it in his condo developments. In October 2020, the Foundation launched the inaugural Jorge and Darlene Pérez Prize in Public Arts & Civic Design. Created in collaboration with America for the Arts, the \$250,000 prize is a first-of-its-kind national program, which will benefit artists, public art administrators, and professionals from the civic design field. The annual gift will celebrate the work of individuals who support, develop, and manage the incorporation of art into the design of places and spaces across the United States. It includes a cash stipend and additional financial support for continuing learning opportunities.

Never one to rest on past successes, Pérez has big plans for Miami's art scene in 2021. Through July 2021, FMM will be presenting *Alfieri with Power: African and African Diaspora Art from the Jorge M. Pérez Collection*. An exhibition of over 40 works by 36 international African and African diaspora artists, including William Kentridge,





I HAVE BUILT WHAT I THINK IS A VERY IMPORTANT AFRICAN CONTEMPORARY COLLECTION - JORGE WISZ



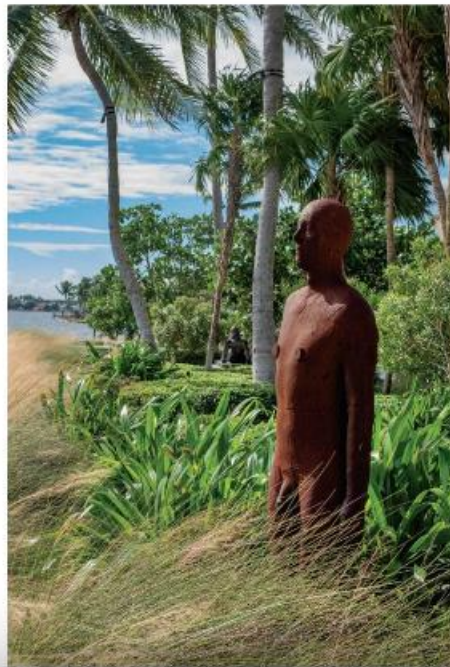
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: FLAME TABLE BY ELIZABETH MURRAY, JORGE WISZ'S ARTIST'S BY THE CURATOR FOOT, AND DORIS SALCEDO'S UNTITLED, 2004, ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG'S UNTITLED AND DIANA FORNBERG'S UNTITLED, FROM THE OBSOLESCENCE SERIES.



FROM BELOW LEFT: **WILSON MAU**  
BY **FABRIZIO SERRA, SAO PAULO**  
**CELAU LE SOUMAYOU**



FROM ABOVE  
**THE IVY ARTIST**  
**GOBLEY**



Kiluanji Kia Henda, Guido Linás, Misheck Mstanzvu, Zanele Muholi, Chisi Samba, and Yinka Shonibare.

Since December 2020, El Espacio 23 has been celebrating its first anniversary with *Witness: Afro Perspectives from the Jorge M. Pérez Collection*, with Zimbabwean guest curator Tondzani Dhlakama from the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art (Zeitz MOCAA) in Cape Town. One hundred works by African and African diaspora artists address themes of systematic oppression, intergenerational trauma, syncretism, identity, and territory.

"We are very pleased that Miami is going to have real significant African and African-American collections for the public to understand the depth and variety of the art coming from the African continent and its influences on the American continent," says Pérez. "We will have a series of artist residencies. The one we have now, Masimba Hwaii from Zimbabwe, is living at El Espacio, producing artworks here with the community, which will be part of other museum collections. In many ways, we are bringing Africa to Miami, which is very exciting to me."

Pérez finds it impossible to name his favorite artists; there are so many of them from each continent and each genre, including many young, up-and-coming artists. He sees philanthropy and giving back as the bulk of his future work. In his work, he says, that can transform cities—not just through building structures, but through sharing culture. It's a mission he carried with him throughout his career. "My ultimate goal is to help others experience this link," he says. "To be remembered as someone who has contributed in a meaningful way to help make society a better place." ❧