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At Jorge Pérez's new 'El Espacio,' art tells a troubling story of our times



Jorge Pérez talks about El Espacio 23, a new art space in Allapattah that will be opening soon.
BY JOSE ANTONIO IGLESIAS

Miami's Condo King is best known for soaring towers that have reshaped urban skylines across Latin America and India. But Jorge Pérez's latest project — and arguably the one he's most excited about, at least these days — is a mere two stories tall. Except for the fresh paint and sliding gate securing the parking area, it's indistinguishable from its boxy warehouse neighbors.

"I'm more excited about this than any damn humongous building," says Pérez.

El Espacio 23, named for its location on Northwest 23rd Street in industrial Allapattah, is Pérez's latest testament to his zeal for both art and Miami. The private museum, which will be unveiled to invited guests this week, opens to the public during art week in early December.

El Espacio fits into a model closely associated with Miami, where leading collectors have created dedicated spaces to provide public access to their private holdings. Those include Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz's de la Cruz Collection in the Design District, Martin Margulies' Margulies Warehouse in Wynwood and the Rubell Family Collection, soon to open in a new space in Allapattah. Works held by the Berkowitz Contemporary Foundation — including a monumental metal sculpture by Richard Serra and a huge light sculpture by James Turrell — are slated to open in Edgewater in the next few years.

But wait. Isn't Jorge Pérez the same man whose name is on the public Pérez Art Museum Miami, an architectural signature designed by the lauded Swiss firm of Herzog & de Meuron? So why renovate this squat, 28,000-square-foot warehouse and operate it year round, with its own demands for utilities, staffing and programming?



Jorge Pérez behind Venus de Arles, 2018, a sculpture by Yinka Shonibare at El Espacio 23. Jose A. Iglesias
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“The museum is a public museum and a museum is a place that *they* choose — rightfully so — what exhibits they’re going to have,” he explains. “I wanted something in which this growing collection could be shown — not only to me, I don’t get to see it, it was always in storage — but also to the public. That was very, very important to me. And I wanted to do the shows that *we* want to do.”

By we, he means a formidable trio of himself and his curatorial team, Patricia M. Hanna and Anelys Alvarez. Together, they have amassed an ever-growing collection of 1,500 contemporary works — photography, painting, sculpture, video — from around the globe.

Pérez provides the fuel — not just the money, but an undampable childlike zest. As he hands many of his professional duties over to his children, Pérez spends increasing hours at galleries, art fairs and artist’s studios across the world. Vacations include museum treks so vigorous that traveling companions sometimes opt out.

“I can tell you there are better collectors in the world,” says Pérez, “but there’s nobody who’s more passionate about art.”

Says Dennis Scholl, fellow collector, former PAMM board member and president / CEO of the Miami Beach studio space, Oolite Arts, “Jorge has gotten into the art world in a profound way. He is building one of the great collections in the world. To have access to that simply by going to the space and opening the door is one of the great gifts anyone can make to our community.”

Many of the works in El Espacio’s inaugural show come from contemporary art superstars — Americans Kara Walker and Rasheed Johnson, China’s Ai Wei Wei, South African William Kentridge.



From left, Venus de Ales, 2018, by Yinka Shonibare, and Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (LEGO), 2015, by Ai Weiwei at Jorge Pérez' new private museum, El Espacio 23. Jose A. Iglesias JIGLESIAS@ELNUEVOHERALD.COM

But this isn't art for art's sake. For Pérez, born in Argentina to Cuban parents, art is nourishment for mind and soul.

"It's not just about art. It's about meaning, it's about society, it's about change," says Pérez. "Art has changed my life .. it makes you think in different ways. I think that it makes us more creative and more understanding. Being friends with artists has been a tremendous thing for me. So if that humanizes me, then I feel it humanizes others."

El Espacio's opening exhibition, "Time for Change: Art and Social Unrest in the Jorge M. Pérez Collection," features more than 80 artworks arrayed by noted Colombian curator Jose Roca. It will be accompanied by a 600-page collection of essays by academics and experts on the topics explored in the show.

The exhibit is intended to provoke disquiet through themes of state terror, activism, migration, displacement, history and memory, exploitation, spatial politics and individualism.

It's both an anthem to perseverance and a painful scrape against raw skin.

Some of the works here require close inspection. At first glance, Lester Rodriguez's seems like any map of U.S. Latino demographics; up close, the "pins" are revealed as chess pawns. Gonzalo Lebrija's 2015 library could be any prettily arranged book display — until one sees that these books have been shot through with bullets.

In other works, the messages are overt. "The Days of This Society is Numbered" proclaims Rirkrit Tiravanija in red block letters on a background of pages from the New York Times. In a life-size sculpture by Fernando Sanchez Castillo, a student has been pushed against the wall in the classic police pat-down pose, his trousers at his ankles — a reference to a 1968 massacre of unarmed students in Mexico. A rare 2017 sculpture by Edward Rusche announces, "WEN OUT FOR CIGRETS N NEVER CAME BACK."

Still others are in-your-face declarations of anger. For Pérez, the "coolest" work in the show is Tracey Rose's 2012 video. The artist — pregnant at the time — stands nude before a wall emblazoned with

names of leaders of color killed by whites they opposed: Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Steve Biko, Patrice Lumumba. *White white white white white!* Rose chants throughout the video.



A work titled The Palace of Quilombos. Gonalves 1793, 2015 by Umar Rashid (Forhawk two feathers) at Jorge Pérez' new private museum, El Espacio 23, in Allapattah. Jose A. Iglesias JIGLESIAS@ELNUEVOHERALD.COM

Even the most visually beautiful works come with unsettling backstories. Gonzalo Fuenmayor's charcoal drawing of an elaborate chandelier hung from a stalk of bananas memorializes violence in the 1920s, when the Colombian government supported the United Fruit Company against striking workers, killing hundreds. Pierre Gonord's exquisitely lit 2005 photographic portrait, "Kevin," depicts a man who looks more like a celebrity rather than the homeless man he really is. Its spiritual cousins — Walker Evans images shot in Havana and the U.S. in the 1930s — can be found near the entry to the show.

Together, the works in "Time for Change" create an arresting tapestry of a world gone wrong.

"We wanted the first exhibit here to talk about art as a social-change agent," says Pérez. "All art needs public and private donations to survive. Many people say that art is something just for the rich ... that it's just pretty and ornamental. I say no, art tells the story of our times. It should help not only our souls, but also our minds in understanding the issues of our generations.

"If I can change people's mind then I've accomplished a lot."

If the concepts of billionaire status — the Forbes 2019 list puts his net worth at \$1.9 billion — and social instigator seem at odds, Pérez notes that after he studied economics in the U.S., he planned to return to his home in Colombia "to help make society more equitable." Instead he became an urban planner, and then an affordable housing developer — a market his company works in still, even though it is better known today for its luxury offerings.

His success, says Pérez, comes with responsibility.

“I think particularly because you are a wealthy person, that you have an obligation to give back to society. I come from countries where we have constant revolutions. There’s no question that the revolutions don’t come in just because there’s one guy, whether he’s left or right, who decides he wants to be the dictator. They come in because there are huge struggles between the haves and the have-nots. And the more that the haves give back, the less those social struggles are going to be felt and the more equal society that we have.”

Pérez hopes El Espacio’s social mission will extend to artists who will stay and work there in three apartments built specially for residencies. “We want to help artists come to Miami and to improve not only their careers in art, but also give back to the community. So we envision them coming and teaching maybe in the local high school, things like that.”



Jorge Perez' new private museum, El Espacio 23, located at 2270 NW 23rd St. in Allapattah. Jose A. Iglesias
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He wants to encourage the neighborhood to engage with the art as well. To that end, El Espacio is planning group art activations and free barbecues. “We want the neighbors to come in here, and when they do, there will always be someone here who can explain the art. With conceptual art in particular, that is extremely important, to know what the artist was thinking about.”

Pérez is also devising income opportunities. He hopes to arrange a business involving local artist Agustina Woodgate, the nearby Goodwill Industries facility and other neighbors. Together, they would create the hand-sewn rugs made from castaway stuffed animals that have become a signature of Woodgate’s artistic practice — a means of preserving loving memories while paying homage to the Eastern emblem of heritage. The plan calls for the artist, the sewers and Goodwill to share sales revenue.

Future shows at El Espacio may come with much gentler messages.

“Other parts of my collection, they don’t talk about society,” Pérez says. “But they’re just so beautiful that they’re inspiring.” In the planning stages is a collaboration with Madrid’s Reina Sofia showcasing works by Spanish artists. And down the road, possibly an exhibit of Pérez’s holdings in contemporary African art.

What El Espacio won’t do is cannibalize shows or attention from PAMM, say those involved.

Curators from the museum and Pérez’s own art staff communicate constantly, according to PAMM Director Franklin Sirmans. He and Pérez have traveled together extensively and talk frequently about art, artists and ideas.

But Pérez’s boundless enthusiasm has outgrown any single set of walls — or the rigid advance timelines of a public museum, says Sirmans. “Hopefully, we’ll complement each other.”

For Pérez, the aims of PAMM and El Espacio are far different. “We want this — El Espacio — to be experimental. We want it to be more personal,” he says. Its name intentionally doesn’t include *Pérez*, to avoid confusion.

If all goes according to plan, El Espacio may some day belong to PAMM as a satellite for experimental work.

“In the future, when I’m gone, I would love to see this space become a young PAMM, just like PS1 in New York, where you have MoMA and then smaller spaces.,” says Pérez. “This could be a place for contemporary, younger and local art.

“I would love that.”