



ART REVIEW: Leyla Cárdenas Opens New Chapter with Construction Debris

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by Elisa Turner

Recalling frail newsprint or smudged drawings, much of the photographic imagery in the current show at Dimension Variable's new space perplexes and challenges. Initially the doubled photographic images are tough to decipher. Similarly striking are sculptural works composed of tattered scraps of drywall. With a peculiar, restless grace, they've been assembled from construction debris gathered in this art space.

It's a show still shaking off dusty memories of demolition and renovation, but in a meditative way. Could it be that past memories run headlong into the present? The title "Vice Versa" suggests the mirroring effect created in the photographic works, in which an image is presented side-by-side with its exact copy in reverse.

"Vice Versa," a site-specific exhibit by Bogotá-based artist [Leyla Cárdenas](#), opens a challenging new chapter for the edgy, non-profit artist-run space [Dimensions Variable](#), established in Miami in 2009. Founding co-directors are artists [Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova](#) and [Frances Trombly](#).



Installation view of "Vice Versa" by Leyla Cárdenas. Courtesy of Dimensions Variable.

After inhabiting a space in the Design District and in a building farther south near Pérez Art Museum Miami, [Dimensions Variable](#) has moved yet again, to the downtown Frances Wolfson campus of Miami Dade College. DV has an [eight-year lease](#) and a commitment to provide educational programming with its exhibits.

When I visited the space in February 2017, Rodriguez-Casanova told me that Cárdenas was the "perfect" artist to create the first, truly inaugural exhibit. (A group show including Cárdenas was presented in late 2016, timed to coincide with Art Basel Miami Beach.) "We wanted to celebrate the history of the place. We knew she was this kind of urban architectural archeologist," he said. "She delves into the history of the architecture, digs into the layers of the wall."



Detail of “Backwards” by Leyla Cárdenas, 2017. Courtesy of Dimensions Variable.

Added Trombly: “It’s also a fresh perspective. Someone coming here from the outside will have a new view.”

That new view is laden with reminders of the old, in which Miami history plays a dominant role. To prepare for this exhibit, Cárdenas researched archives of local institutions, including online archives of The Miami Herald, explained Rodriguez-Casanova. She encountered imagery evoking a wealth of information about the growth of the college and this subtropical city, perched at the edge of the Caribbean.

Formerly known as Dade County Junior College when it was founded in 1959, Miami Dade College now has the largest undergraduate enrollment of any college or university in this country. Its student body is the most diverse, a fact reflected throughout the college art programs.

With exacting attention to subtle detail, Cárdenas ingeniously inserts the history of this relatively modest, 3,000-square foot Miami Dade College art space into Miami’s ongoing history.

More than 30 years of exhibits have been presented in the art gallery on this campus, recently known as the Centre Gallery, the predecessor to DV. Many of those past exhibits speak to the evolving cross-cultural identity of Miami.

Cárdenas pays homage to one of those previous exhibits in *Stratum*. It’s a slim, horizontal band of splintered, pastel-flecked paint peeled from the gallery’s baseboards. Mounted across the midsection of two adjacent gallery walls, the work is a notable cultural artifact for this city, loaded with more resonance than one might expect from the minimalist, austere form.



Installation view of “Vice Versa” by Leyla Cárdenas, including “Stratum.” Courtesy of Dimensions Variable.



Detail of “Stratum” by Leyla Cárdenas, 2017. Courtesy of Dimensions Variable.

Stratum incorporates the rescued, sculptural residue of the gallery as it was painted in 1999 for an exhibit by Chilean-born Eugenia Vargas. With such a provenance of sorts, *Stratum* is a cultural residue of Miami’s own art history. A Miami resident at the time who now lives and works in Chile,

Vargas was residing in Miami when she represented her native country in the Latin American section of the 2003 Venice Biennial.

Intentionally or not, Cárdenas opens the door to other creative investigations of how past history of this college gallery can overlap and interact with the present.

The Cuban-born artist Carlos Alfonzo (1950-1991), who fled Cuba in 1980 during the Mariel Boatlift to Florida, had one of his first solo shows in this country in 1988 at what was then called Frances Wolfson Art Gallery of Miami-Dade Community College. In 1991, he was one of 101 artists whose work was included in the Whitney Biennial in New York.

Widely revered and remembered in Miami, and in general by collectors and scholars of contemporary Latin American art, Alfonzo's painting can once again be seen at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in the current show, described [here](#), "Fast Forward: Painting from the 1980s."

In "Vice Versa" at DV, *Some other beginning's end* is perhaps the most prominent work. It's a photographic transfer recording the demolition of the city's Pacific Building, which was grandly constructed during the 1920s real estate boom. Some five decades later, the building had seriously decayed. In 1970 it was demolished to make room for the Wolfson Campus of Miami Dade College.



"Some other beginning's end" by Leyla Cárdenas, 2017. Site specific photographic transfer. Courtesy of Dimensions Variable.

Cárdenas amplifies the effect of the skeletal, collapsing architectural remains in two ways: by creating doubled, mirrored images for her photographic transfer, and by stripping away a ribbon of paper from each image. Each "ribbon" dangles awkwardly, evoking the vertiginous sense of ongoing destruction, continually paving the way for a new phase, one that will surely morph into yet another demise and rebirth.



Detail of "Some other beginning's end" by Leyla Cárdenas, 2017. Site specific photographic transfer. Courtesy of Dimensions Variable.

This is a galvanizing scene for the entire selection of 23 works here, as the history it revisits is implicit throughout the highly site-specific "Vice Versa."

Some other beginning's end will remain once the show concludes. It will be painted over, sealed into the history of this space, perhaps discovered again during another investigation into the past.

Unspooling more scenes of demolition related to the Pacific Building, the artist's *Backwards* series presents 18 mirrored photographic transfer images. Each is delicately transferred to lightly bent shards of paint peeled from walls of the gallery during its transformation into the current DV. With edges that look as friable as leftover slices of wedding cake, the paint shards offer a destabilizing context for these disorienting images, so thoroughly imbued with a tenuous "Through the Looking Glass" spirit themselves.

Discovering how the past is echoed in the present is, Cárdenas reminds us, a timeless, ongoing effort, ever likely to confound and surprise.

BASIC FACTS: "Vice Versa—Leyla Cárdenas" is on view February 4 to March 31, 2017 at Dimensions Variable, 300 NE Avenue, MDC Building 1, 3rd Floor, Miami FL 33132. www.dimensionsvariable.net

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