

INFLUENCER: Rina Carvajal Is Remaking a Miami Museum, Inside and Out

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by Elisa Turner



Portrait of Rina Carvajal. © Amalia Caputo, 2009. Courtesy of MOAD.

Miami, FL—Miami’s infamous traffic jams don’t stop Rina Carvajal from forging connections with art.

“I’m super interested in public space and art that happens in the city,” said Carvajal, executive director and chief curator of the Museum of Art and Design at [Miami Dade College \(MOAD\)](#). She’s currently presiding over a massive reset of the museum, which had been closed for a year. “I always feel like we don’t have public squares here, where people can connect to meet each other. You do everything in a car.”

When asked about the plaza of the [Philip Johnson](#)-designed Miami-Dade Cultural Center where the Miami Art Museum was once located, she laughed. “People go to that plaza? No.”

Housed in downtown Miami’s [iconic 1925 Freedom Tower](#), MOAD reopened April 7, 2018 with ambitious exhibits and city-wide programs. Its 17,000 square feet of gallery space has been

transformed, although that's not immediately apparent. The museum has undergone a [\\$245,000 renovation](#), and now galleries feature enhanced net and audio-visual connectivity, which enhances the museum's ability to present contemporary art projects with significant amounts of sound, light and video.

In the museum's ongoing series called "Living Together," more than 10 city-wide programs took place before MOAD reopened, paving the way for its reinvention in Miami. The series unfolds from January to September 2018 and is set to include works by 17 acclaimed national and international artists as part of cross-disciplinary programming taking place in different locations across Miami, according to the program announcement. Click [here](#) for the full planned schedule.

"This is about humanizing the place where we live and connecting people in a meaningful way, not excluding people," she said. "I think more and more Miami needs these kinds of initiatives."

By looking beyond institutional walls, MOAD's forward-looking "Living Together" is in line, to some extent, with initiatives of other adventurous art spaces.



The Freedom Tower. Photo: Oriol Tarridas, 2018. Courtesy of MOAD.

Philadelphia Contemporary has presented pop-up exhibitions and performances throughout Philadelphia, engaging audiences in events that range from the visual arts to spoken word to performance. In this effort, the institution collaborates with many partners and is driven by, as its [website](#) explains, “the emerging reality that artists are working across multiple disciplines.”

The Mexican gallery [Kurimanzutto](#) established a New York City outpost in May. In New York City, as it has done in Mexico City, it will not be tied to a single address but will adapt “to the ideas of the artists it shows—both Mexican and international—by moving around the city,” The [New York Times](#) [reported](#).

In Miami, community-based programs excite Carvajal. “This has been a love of mine and a passion of mine since I was very young: how to bring art to everyone,” she said. “Not everyone comes to a museum but we can go to them.”

“Living Together”

“Living Together” involves a stimulating yearlong series of 25 cross-disciplinary events designed in part to provoke more awareness of civic spaces. It was developed by Carvajal and [Joseph Wolin](#), an independent curator based in New York. They are currently preparing next year’s series, “A City for the People.”

Programs this year embrace performance art, film and video screening, readings, workshops, and more. In January 2018, Karen Finley performed “Unicorn Gratitude Mystery” in the Wynwood District, presented with The Miami Light Project for The Light Box at Goldman Warehouse. Brandishing her fearless wit, Finley took on tense sexual politics disrupting the 2016 Presidential campaign. In April 2018, celebrated poet Richard Blanco read from his works during a sold out evening cruise on Biscayne Bay.

“The Living Together series is so impressive. It’s extensive, just mind-boggling, and I wish I could go to every single program that’s being offered,” said Miami-based art advisor Suzanne Delehanty. In February 2018, she attended Carrie Mae Weems’s new performance-based work, “Past Tense,” which weaves together timely allusions to the Sophocles tragedy “Antigone.”

“I like the fact that it was in a relatively small space and had an intimacy like a kind of chamber theater piece. Very profound,” added Delehanty. “It has to do with justice, that justice is forever part of the human condition since times of Greek antiquity.”

One sunny Saturday in February 2018, Carvajal grinned and chatted with a crowd gathered in Miami’s Little Haiti neighborhood for a “Living Together” event. This was “[Maggic Banquet](#),” created by Miami and Barcelona-based artist Antonio Miralda with his longtime partner Montse Guillen, founders of the global [FoodCultura](#).

That afternoon, food, music, dance, and dress were all part of the art. It paid tribute to culinary traditions of Miami’s ethnic groups, many from the Caribbean with African ties. Delectable bites were served buffet style. Maggi provided ubiquitous seasoning, in a clever nod to the West African

roots of this widely used flavoring cube.

The event took place in a parking lot for art spaces, which included [Exile Books](#), an experimental artists' book store, soon to publish a book about "Maggic Banquet." The book "is very exciting and reflective of the event," Exile Books founder Amanda Keeley exclaimed in an email, "energetic, ephemeral, really tied to the essence of Miralda's magic!!"

Students from MDC Miami Culinary Institute, working with professional chefs, prepared tasting-sized dishes. A zine published recipes in English, Spanish, and Creole. A local band added percussive brio with traditional Haitian rara music.

"There were many partners. This way we all shine and we all continue," Carvajal said. While speaking, she moved to the infectious beat of the vimeo clip of "[Maggic Banquet](#)" playing on the computer in her office during our April 13, 2018, interview.

On View at MOAD

There's also plenty to see inside the reinvented MOAD. The current exhibition, "By the People: Designing a Better America," is organized by the Smithsonian's [Cooper-Hewitt](#) design museum in New York. It investigates 60 projects across the country in rural, city, and suburban regions, analyzing their empowering approaches to problems facing these diverse communities in areas like health, housing, education, and the environment.

Designer and artist Alessandra Mondolfi, who attended the opening in April, praised in particular a display documenting jewelry-making from recycled graffiti as "intersectional design" in its use of "art and commerce and women's issues about providing employment."



Process Lab being used by visitors at the MOAD Opening. Activities are designed to impart firsthand experience of the ways designers solve problems and develop new ideas. Photo by Francisco Moraga. Courtesy MOAD.

In May, galleries of MDC Special Collections of the Freedom Tower opened on the building's main floor. Overseen by Carvajal, the galleries are intended to enhance MOAD's educational thrust. They are deeply connected to modern Miami's historical roots and to Florida's broader historical context.

In addition, important source material related to the history of early Americas may also be found at the Freedom Tower, courtesy of the [Jay I. Kislak Foundation](#), which made a [joint donation of historic objects](#) in 2017 from the Kislak collection to both Miami Dade College's Freedom Tower and the University of Miami's Otto G. Richter Library in Coral Gables, FL.

The Kislak collection includes rare books, maps, manuscripts and historic materials, including two of the earliest published editions of the famous 1493 letter of Christopher Columbus, according to the donation announcement. The donation will help facilitate collaborations between UM and MDC.

The expanded Cuban Legacy Gallery at the Freedom Tower was inaugurated in May 2018 with "[Cuban Streams: 1855 - 1965](#)," a multi-media installation by Miami artist [César Trasobares](#), drawn from historical photographs in a private collection. Kislak Center at MDC is presenting its inaugural exhibition, "[Culture and Change in the Early Americas](#)," co-curated by Arthur Dunkelman, director of the Jay I. Kislak Foundation, and by art historian Dr. Carol Damian. It's a historical look at the Western Hemisphere, from Native American cultures to the present day.

Also debuting in May, MOAD presents [William Kentridge's *More Sweetly Play the Dance*](#). It's a large-scale 8-channel video installation surrounding viewers with imagery inspired by refugee crises and a New Orleans jazz funeral. Kentridge, an internationally acclaimed South African artist, has long been admired for his vivid reflections on the legacy of his country's dismantled apartheid policy.

His works "speak of art and politics, of humanism and the uncertainty of a world always contradicting itself," Carvajal said in a statement. "The artist's deeply poetic approach to issues that matter urgently makes *More Sweetly Play the Dance* a crucial work of art to bring to Miami."



Still from William Kentridge's "More Sweetly Play the Dance." Courtesy of MOAD.

Rina Carvajal Arrives

Carvajal first came to the United States from her native Venezuela when she was 18 to study at New York University. There she did graduate work at the Institute of Fine Arts, while also holding various positions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the late 1980s and 90s. Those were her first museum positions.

Her wide experience as an art historian and curator reflects more than two decades of working in museums, universities, and public art organizations in the U.S., Canada, and Latin America. Having written extensively on modern and contemporary art for many publications, she was also tapped to be co-curator for the Sao Paulo Biennial in 1998 and 2010.

Beginning in 2004 she was executive director and chief curator of Miami Art Central (MAC) until it closed in 2008. Among her accomplishments at MAC: In 2005 she curated the "Forms of Silence: Carmen Herrera Abstract Works, 1948-1987" exhibition, 11 years before the [Whitney Museum of American Art famously honored the 101-year old Herrera](#) with a solo show in 2016. She also brought to MAC a comprehensive survey of Kentridge's work from 1979 to 2004, with more than 70 works on paper, sculpture, and more than 15 films.

Growing up in Caracas, Carvajal attended a French school in that city when Venezuela was stable and prosperous, a polar opposite of the country in such desperate straits today. She belonged to a cultured, educated family. Art and literature were early loves. She took frequent trips to Europe with her family.

"I remember my connection to art through books. I spent my life reading and dreaming, imagining things," Carvajal said. "I had a travel book where I would write down all my travels."

Her stepfather, a diplomat posted to Japan, taught her about Japanese language and culture. It seems he loved a grand sense of fun. Once, after he and her mother had returned from a trip to

Paris, he announced to her and her sisters: “Girls, dress beautifully, we are going to celebrate Paris!” With everyone dressed for a special occasion, they shared a memorable meal and gifts he brought from Paris. “So we would have this French experience,” she recalled, smiling.

Still, she admits that “my parents did not want me to study art. They felt it was not responsible, that I should be a lawyer, or something like that.”

When her parents declined to support her college studies in art history, she did it on her own. She took a job assisting the artistic director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Caracas while studying at the Art School of Central University of Caracas. After the first year, she received top grades. Then her mother relented, Carvajal recalled, telling her daughter, “I don’t know what to do with you. Choose a place in the world where you can find people like you and you can be happy. And you can do that in the best university.”

It was then her life with art began in earnest, taking her first to New York University.

She’s now lived in Miami for 15 years, remaining after Miami Art Central closed, though some thought she would move to New York, Los Angeles or other cities where she has professional ties. Why did she stay? “Miami has a soul,” she said. “It has something special. I love this place.”

MOAD Forward

At MOAD, she looks forward to a fall exhibit by the [Danish artist collective Superflex](#), which has received mixed reviews for its recent playful installation at London’s Tate Modern. “We Are All in the Same Boat” by Superflex will focus specifically on Miami. With the collective’s trademark ironic wit, Carvajal explained, it will address water, finances, banking and immigration.

“I have great partners. I am very resourceful and resilient,” she said, but sighed about her latest challenge of dealing with the State of Florida’s [steep cuts to its arts grants](#), from a reported \$25 million to \$2.6 million. “Miami is not the easiest place to fundraise because everyone is going to the same sources,” she added. “We need more philanthropic support.”

These cuts mean she must stretch even further MOAD’s current budget of \$950,000 with its staff of nine. Michael Spring, who directs Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, calls this year’s state cuts “draconian.”

By contrast, Spring explained via email on April 26, 2018 that Miami-Dade County is “sustaining its arts grants.” He added, “The Department of Cultural Affairs is particularly proud to provide meaningful grant support to the Museum of Art and Design at Miami Dade College in light of the inspired leadership being provided by Rina Carvajal.

“Rina has a track record of curatorial excellence in her work that is inextricably complemented by her deep commitment to connecting with the overall community. Her work to make the arts matter serves as an example of the vital programs that we stand to lose if recent, drastic State funding cuts to arts grants are not restored.”

BASIC FACTS: “By the People: Designing a Better America” is on view April 17 to September 30, 2018 and “William Kentridge: More Sweetly Play the Dance” is on view May 19, 2018 to January 20, 2019 at Museum of Art and Design at Miami Dade College, Freedom Tower, 2nd Floor, 600 Biscayne Blvd., Miami 33132.

“Culture and Change in the Early Americas” opened May 20, 2018, at the Kislak Center and “Cuban Streams: 1855 - 1965” by César Trasobares and remains on view to May 19, 2019 at the Cuban Legacy Gallery in Miami Dade College Special Collections at the Freedom Tower, Ground floor, 600 Biscayne Blvd, Miami 33132. www.mdcmoad.org

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