

Art



They Say, 'Balls!'

Two artists find inspiration in coconuts and bubbles

BY MICHAEL MILLS

There's a lovely paradox at the heart of some recent works by Pérez Celis. The Argentine artist anchors his mixed-media canvases in mundane, earthbound objects, then superimposes those objects with colors and forms that send the imagery up and out into the cosmos.

For Celis — who was born in Buenos Aires in 1939, has lived and worked elsewhere in South America and in Paris and New York, and is now based in Miami — the dividing line between the celestial and the terrestrial is tentative at best. He discovers other galaxies, even other universes, in the hull of an ordinary coconut.

That familiar South Florida item is the subject of a sort of "coconut shell suite" that's part of "**Pérez Celis: Beyond Borders**," one of two shows now at the Coral Springs Museum of Art. *Coconut Shell — Backlighting* and *Coconut Shell* are a dual study in contrast. The former posits a dark, dense space, with rich reds surrounding the equally rich blues of the almost-unrecognizable coconut shell, the surface of which is studded with dark circles emanating yellow coronas, like the sun at full eclipse. In the latter piece, the pale shell seems to have cracked open and sent countless bits of glowing stellar matter into the space around it.

The other three works in the "suite" limit their palettes. *Coconut Shell — Red* comes across as a distillation of elements from the two paintings mentioned in the previous paragraph. *Coconut Shell — White* is more refined, a cooling down of *Red*'s concentrated heat, with dark stars floating in chilly space.

It's with *Coconut Shell — Luminary*, however, that Celis achieves full transcendence. The piece, which might as well be called *Coconut Shell — Blue*, retains only the most rudimentary suggestion of the shell, which has otherwise been all but obliterated in a wash of deep, vibrant blue. And the dark orbs of the previously mentioned paintings have been transformed into glowing white spheres — 13 of them, scattered across the surface of the image, resembling nothing so much as a distant constellation seen through a telescope.

What looks to be the shell of a chambered nautilus comes into play in other works, although Celis doesn't seem quite as taken with

the form and doesn't get nearly as much mileage as he gets from the humble coconut hull. The spiral of the shell, however, fuels other flights of artistic fancy. For *Beyond Borders* and *Infinitem Finitum*, he uses it to suggest a vortex of energy at play in the vastness of space, drawing us into its depths with each seductive curve. The center of *Beyond Borders*, in particular, fairly pulsates with light and energy.

In *Astron Deep* and *Radiant Astron*, two more variations on a theme, Celis starts with a background of thick, wavy horizontal bands. Then he applies a burst of points of light exploding into space from the center of the canvas like a re-creation of the Big Bang. Look closely at the fine trails of light that trace the paths of these cosmic bodies — especially in *Astron Deep* — and you'll see a subtle interplay of control and spontaneity. The light trails have little dribble effects, as if the pigment has been flung onto the canvas, while the lines themselves are straight and highly calculated.

Other, less-effective pieces blanket the surface of the canvas with a spray of starlike dots. In these, the imagery is less focused, and the pale, washed-out backgrounds reinforce the idea that Celis is at his best when he works with darker, more highly saturated colors, as in the red-white-and-blue coconut shell trilogy.

One small room off the museum's main gallery includes a trio of *Resurrezione* pieces — two fairly large, one much smaller — that all include a mysterious three-dimensional object hovering in space. It's a thick, blocky structure, a symmetrical cross-shaped form, and Celis uses the old trick of shifting perspective to make us question our depth perception. Spaces within the images alternate from positive to negative in the blink of an eye.

The exhibition is rounded out with eight freestanding sculptures that dot the museum's large, spacious central gallery. Most of them are tall, slender pieces made of found objects, and while they break up the space pleasantly enough from a distance, they don't bear closer scrutiny, at least not in this context — seen next to Celis's ethereal canvases, they seem heavy and hopelessly earthbound. In general, though, museum director Barbara O'Keefe has done an excellent job of grouping similar pieces throughout the show.

All but one of the sculptures, it turns out, were created during the early 1990s, when Celis worked out of New York (inspired, perhaps, by its skyscrapers?). The canvases, on the other hand, are all from the artist's

current Miami period, most of them the result of a remarkable burst of creativity last year. There's nothing to suggest the subtropical environment in which these pieces were generated, although clearly something about South Florida has struck an inspirational chord in Celis.

The museum's second current exhibition — and both end soon, so don't dally — is "**Sylvia Riquezes: Blow Me a Bubble**," a selection of more than two dozen pieces in a variety of media. The common denominator in these works by the Boca Raton-based artist is that all incorporate her bright-red "bubbles" — balls in the three-dimensional pieces, circles in the two-dimensional ones.

The installation *Dare to Pass*, for instance, is a sort of archway formed by strands of rope enclosing a handful of large red balls, with another on the floor nearby. The wall-mounted *Circle I*, on the other hand, consists of LP records painted red and arranged to form a big circle. There are variations on these two pieces elsewhere in the show.

Other pieces feature balls of various sizes engaged in various activities: One sits at the base of a wooden ladder in *Escape*, ready to climb from the words PURPOSE IN LIFE at the bottom to SUCCESS stenciled on the wall at the top; another ball substitutes for the knob on a green door in *Welcome*; several balls rest on and around a sky-blue plastic playground slide in *Exit or Entrance*; eight bowling balls painted red make up *Circle III*, with a solitary blue out-cast off to one side.

Here and there are photographs of red balls or bubbles in different contexts. Next to the big ball of acrylic and modeling paste

Blow Me This Bubble, which resembles bubble gum, are four color photographs of people blowing bubbles with... bubble gum. A triptych of photos called *Return to Origins* features a pregnant woman with a big red circle painted on her belly.

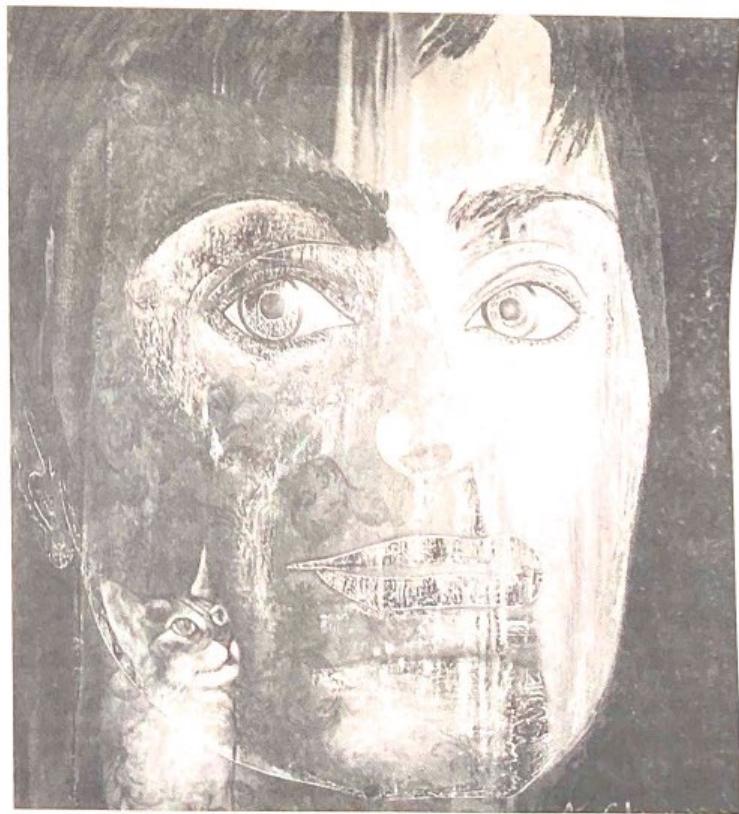
The most ambitious — and most powerful — piece is the installation *Peace Inside*, which includes camouflaged netting and bowling balls with military helmets arrayed around a large, vertical rectangular box. Peer inside the box and you'll see your own eyes (plus a third eye in between — how Riquezes does it, I have no idea) reflected in a mirror, along with what appears to be a dimly lit corridor filled with red balls that seem to stretch into infinity.

A brochure and a handout for the show quote Riquezes: "[T]he red ball, playing a main part within the work, is an emblem of humanity, individual and/or universal, that is trapped, covered and a prisoner of schemes rigorously pre-established, of a world that wants to mold it to its convenience and perspectives, codifying it with a language many times subliminal, represented pictorially by a series of symbols..."

I regret reading this artspeak, as well as the even more highfalutin musings in an accompanying essay by Miami "art historian/sociologist of art" Dr. Milagros Bello. Silly me — I just admired Riquezes' work for its whimsicality and sense of plain old fun.

A final note: As part of the only artists-in-residence program in the area, the Coral Springs Museum has commissioned Jan Kolenda and John Foster to create *The Everglades — A Relief Ceramic Tile Wall Mural*. The 54-by-17-foot tile mural will be permanently installed on the museum's south side in time for a September dedication ceremony. Between now and then, supporters of the arts are invited to participate in the project by buying a square foot (nine tiles) or a square yard (81 tiles) of the mural. Call the museum for details. ☉

"Pérez Celis: Beyond Borders" and "Sylvia Riquezes: Blow Me a Bubble" On display through May 17 at the Coral Springs Museum of Art, 2855 Coral Springs Dr., Coral Springs, 954-340-5000.



Pérez Celis finds other galaxies in the hull of a coconut