



OFF TO A SMASHING START

The Perez Art Museum Miami's stunning architecture is just one reason why it's grabbing headlines

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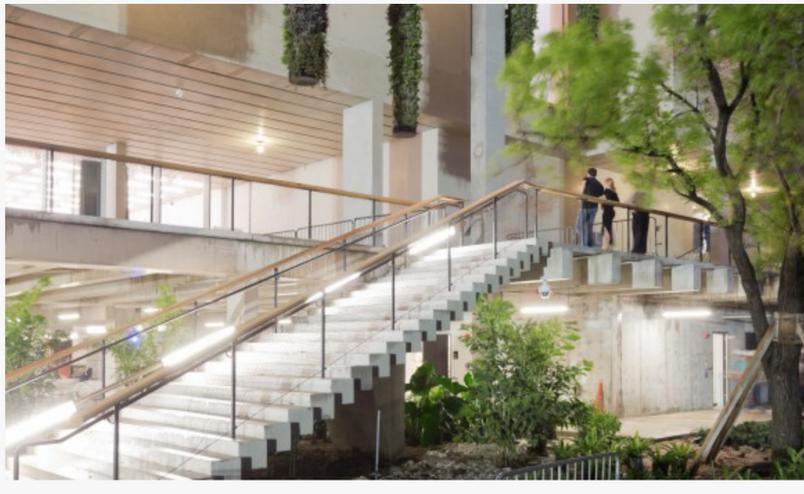


Artistic, scientific and architectural genius are in full bloom at Miami's new Perez Art Museum, where the innovative French landscape architect Patrick Blanc has installed an incredible hanging garden of potted plants. Forming a verdant vertical screen, some 77 native species hang from a trellis-like system of wood slats that architects Herzog and de Meuron have placed atop their low-slung structure.

The whole thing makes for an exciting introduction to this much-talked about building, but this lovely plaza – which offers terrific views of both downtown skyscrapers and a bucolic port – is just the beginning of the museum experience.

Take, for example, the giant bronze heads – a dog here, a rooster there – that quickly reveal themselves to be representations of Chinese zodiac signs. The work of dissident artist Ai Weiwei, they're part of his first retrospective, 'According to What?' (through 16 March), the inaugural show at this relocated and expanded space of what was previously known as the Miami Art Museum.

The last time the Pritzker-Prize winning Swiss architectural firm and the Chinese artist worked together was on the Beijing National Stadium. But it's Weiwei's more recent involvement with the ancient pottery of his homeland – and his turbulent relationship with such cultural artefacts – that has been in the news of late.



That's because a relatively understated work, *Colored Vases*, which involves Weiwei's application of bright industrial paint to 2,000-year-old terra cotta vessels, was vandalised at the museum a few weeks ago when a local artist casually picked up one of the 16 pieces that make up the installation and smashed it to the ground. The resulting furor may have driven up attendance, but it seems like an outrageous poetic justice for Weiwei, whose own interest in and appropriation of familiar cultural objects have made him the Andy Warhol of his time.

Like Warhol, he seems to do everything – and it's all here, from documentary-style photography (dozens of images garnered from his walks on Manhattan's East Village in the punk-strewn 1980s) to witty architecture like *Tea Houses*, half-ton structures made of, you guessed it, tightly packed tea leaves. Other objects that Weiwei has commandeered for commentary include utilitarian furniture such as burnished armoires and rustic stools. The unexpected results are breathtaking meditations on the endurance and beauty of common objects.

The artist has also crafted a few new pieces for this exhibit, which was co-curated by Tokyo's Mori Art Museum. Most dramatic is *Stacked*, designed for the museum's upper lobby space and featuring hundreds of intriguingly interlocked bicycles. Made by the Forever Company, the bikes have become emblematic of China, but are rapidly disappearing from its ever-modernising streets. A simpler exhibit, *Jade Handcuffs*, speaks volumes as a reference to Weiwei's incarceration in China. It's a touching example of the exhibition's overarching theme: by questioning (sometimes gently, sometimes not), our adherence to the things and the past, can we open ourselves to ideas and the future?

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