

The Miami Herald

Bass Museum's 50th anniversary exhibit is all about history's favorite precious metal

Anne Tschida
November 15, 2014
The Miami Herald



The GOLD exhibit at the Bass Museum of Art is layered with meaning, some obvious, some subtle. To begin with, the title acknowledges the 50th birthday of the museum — its Golden Anniversary. Starting from that base, the works from 24 international artists all deal on some level with gold.

Gold has represented the obvious for millennia: a common symbol of wealth the world over, decorating temples and palaces and cutlery, and the basis of much currency. It can represent beauty, and crass ostentation.

In this hemisphere, gold has dark tones as well. When the Spanish landed in the New World, gold became their main pursuit, leaving indigenous populations depleted and impoverished.

There are references to all this in the various pieces, which are predominantly sculpture. Some work better than others, but it's important to take in each one individually — the mass of gold coloring can make the mind clump them together, but don't.

A concurrent theme throughout involves the use of gold to transform otherwise average objects into something of value. John Miller — whose two collaged works come from the Rubell Family Collection — covers a pile of junky items with imitation gold leaf. Little plastic toys, flowers, old shoes are all mashed together and re-formed as monochrome wall sculptures. In this case, it's not really the gold that has turned this miscellany into something expensive, it's the name of the famed artist.

An excellent sculpture is the free-standing square of gold bricks from German artist Alicja Kwade. These, too, are coated. Underneath the gold leaf and bronze are coal blocks — once again, the real wealth is the black carbon rock on which much of the globe runs; the gold shines, but the coal powers.

Sylvie Fleury's gold-plated trashcan also makes a plain functional object, the receptacle of literal trash, lovely. It's a beautiful piece but doesn't delve very far. In a similar vein, French artist Eric Baudart digs deeper, layering old, tattered street posters on top of one another and spray-painting them with gold coloring; the result is a clever work with intentionally ragged edges.

Another street-inspired piece is the amazing painting from Rudolf Stingel. It starts with graffiti scrawls as its base, which he then cast in copper and electroplated in gold. The references to alchemy here are fascinating, harkening back to the time when people tried to transform base metals into gold.

The past also peeks out in Dario Escobar's gold McDonald's cup. At first glance, equating mass consumption and commercialism with greed and gold seems too easy. But underneath, there's another message relating to the relationship of Spain with conquest and gold. Behind the yellow "M" is Spanish colonial floral patterning — the historic and contemporary layers of New World wealth in one cup.

One of the more conceptual pieces, and one of the best in the exhibit, comes from Glenn Kaino. A series of images on the wall lead up to a gold and steel podium, which casts vertical shadows on the wall behind it, making it look like lighting for a soon-to-be victory celebration. The images are from the 1968 Mexico Olympics, at which African American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in a Black Power salute on the podium while receiving their medals. As a result they were kicked off the team, and Smith was stripped of his "gold." The artist seems to be putting the medals back around their necks in this corner of The Bass.

Less subtle but still powerful is the compositionally excellent installation from South African Robin Rhode. A gilded shovel is placed in a pile of fine coal dust, taking us to the mines where half of all the gold is unearthed, often under horrific, serf-labor conditions.

Not all the works are gold-coated. Ebony G. Patterson gets her own, dimly lit room to show off her 2014 tapestry. The Jamaican artist has been shown in Miami before, and always to great acclaim. On the floor sprawls a brightly colored collage of again cheap items, fake flowers and baubles and sparkles, that on the whole create a mesmerizing, glittering weave reminiscent of Haitian flag art. But look closely and the prominence of toy guns, and the outline of what could be an decapitated body, get to the heart of Patterson's work. She often depicts the extreme violence that plagues her homeland and the Caribbean. All that glitters here certainly isn't gold.

Violence also is the theme of Chris Burden's golden bullets; not hard to discern the connection between wealth and the often-violent

way it is obtained. But the best part of this is the reference to Burden's previous work — he's a pioneering performance artist who rose to fame after his controversial 1971 piece *Shoot*, for which he had an assistant shoot him in the arm.

Another dedicated room belongs to the video from Cyprien Gaillard, which also involves the conquest of the Americas and its consequences. His eight-minute *Cities of Gold and Mirrors* was featured in his big solo show at MoMA PS1 last year. Shot in Cancun, Mexico, it pictures Mayan ruins intermixed with mega-tourist resorts; visitors and locals in the new El Dorado. Don't miss the gangster dancing on the crumbling remains of the previous civilization.

It may be easy to miss one of the pieces created specifically for this exhibit, unless you look to the ceiling. Almost like a chain of gold encompassing or linking the spaces, Todd Pavlisko has lined the top of the walls with coins he collected in one year and covered with gold. It's an inspired work, an absurd string of thousands of commemorative gold coins.

Several locals are included in the exhibit. The photograph from Carlos Betancourt also references Pre-Columbian imagery, symbols and culture. And Martin Opper's humorous installation is loosely tied to the theme of prosperity; it's a standalone gold-plated bar, the kind that every self-respecting 1950s businessman would have in his living room, but it's slightly tilting, maybe like a man drunk on his own power.

The site-specific benches and terrific wallpaper from Cristina Lei Rodriguez, placed outside the galleries, interact with the building itself. Fifty years ago, before its additions and renovations, the Bass was a limestone structure, and she has woven touches of gold leaf and color into remnants of that rock, creating veins of the precious metal.