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# St. Petersburg Times

**PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES Series: WEEKEND DIVERSIONS**

*PAMELA GRINER LEAVY.*

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A welded steel sculpture, flocked and dark in color, stands on display at the Gulf Coast Museum of Art in Largo. The sculpture, created in 2001 and titled *Scatter*, is the work of area artist Richard Beckman, one of 12 contemporary artists showcased through Feb. 20 in the exhibit "Florida Focus: Tampa Bay."



A sculpture titled *Scatter* sits on a pedestal at the Florida Gulf Coast Museum. The piece was created by Richard Beckman in 2001. Beckman, an art professor and artist from Tampa, recently died of an apparent suicide.

**Times Photos - Carrie Pratt**

Coming face to face with Beckman's work, including his 2004 steel creation *So Much Love (Lost)*, provides a stark reminder of the fragility of life and the art community's pain. Beckman, 47, died in Tampa on Christmas Day of an apparent suicide. His memorial service was Jan. 15, the day after the show opened.

Beckman was an art professor at the University of South Florida; the exhibit is dedicated to him and his contributions as an artist, teacher, mentor and friend.

The exhibit offers a variety of edgy contemporary art, including sculpture, paintings, collage, photography and video, all created in this region. Contrasting qualities of darkness and light, whimsy and violence define the work on display.

The show's guest curator, Mark Ormond, former deputy director and senior curator at the

John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, calls the exhibit visceral, soulful, sensual, playful and personal.

"From the artist's experience, the work is all very personal because it's an exercise for the artist in dealing with issues personal to them, whether it's subjective or even if it's just how they use the paint, brush or camera," Ormond said.

While touching art on display isn't allowed at the exhibit, he said the work beckons art patrons to make contact.

"Visceral has to do with making you react with your senses and particularly your sense of touch," said Ormond. "All the work I think makes you want to touch it, run your hands across them with your eyes, follow the flow of the paint."

Speaking of touching, patrons need to take care not to step on the flowing hemp hair of Quercus Emancipation by Leslie Fry. The painted plaster head looks both mystical and heroic as it sprawls on the gallery floor. Three-dimensional in scope, additional heads adorned with flowing hemp bookend the creation on the wall and in a display alcove.

A closer look can also provide a starkly different perspective. Take the images in Manifest Destiny, an ink and acrylic on fabric over canvas piece by Neil Bender. Look from afar, they're like red and green flowers. Up close, they could project a field of male genitalia.

Ormond also offers a wholly different perspective on Manifest Destiny. "Manifest Destiny could be mushrooms, too," he said. "There are a lot of shapes in nature that make us think of different body parts. Nature is very original but also duplicates itself in many ways."

Then there is the in-your-face drawing Cocked & Ready by Theo Wujcik. Two fashionably dressed women complete with low-slung jeans and platform heels strike a pose as one brandishes a machine gun.

Ormond describes the piece as a juxtaposition of parallel universes and indicative of how fashion mirrors world events. "We see this every day when you pick up the New York Times," he said. "There may be a story about Iraq with someone in the military with a gun and right next to it is an ad for a dress from Saks Fifth Avenue for \$8,000. We are constantly juxtaposing these very themes in our life."

Ken Rollins, museum director for more than 10 years, cites excellence, not controversy as the museum's mission.

"I don't try to organize or schedule exhibits that are controversial," said Rollins, who was awarded the Florida Association of Museums' Lifetime Achievement Award in November. "That is not the intent. The intent is to reflect contemporary trends in art and art of the highest excellence."

"Florida Focus: Tampa Bay" is about much more than grief or shock. In a multimedia piece titled Shalom de Cuba, photographer Beth Reynolds combines images and words

to convey the spirit of Cuba's Jewish community. Burk Uzzle's humorous black-and-white and color photography observes people, places and animals, including a striking field of cows.

A sense of excitement, fun and soul is what Ormond hopes museum visitors take away from the exhibit.

"I hope they take away an excitement about what artists are doing right now and an appreciation that these artists are thoughtful," he said. "I chose them because they are not just making art. They are making art that reflects on art that's been made before and adding to what we know about how things can be drawn and photographed."