

Al Burt Papers

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Florida's Roving Reporter and *Miami Herald* Columnist

"The Nature and Future of Florida's Art"

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In South Florida, life itself is the major art. We live in a beautiful tropical garden cultivated from a desert that lies between an ocean and a swamp.

Our home is a three-ring chapel, sometimes mistaken for a circus. Trapeze artists plan for the future. Executive clowns compete for the pulpit. Out here in the bleacher-pews, we are as decisive as butterflies, as playful as porpoises, as bad-tempered as urban alligators, and as gracefully ambitious in peculiar directions as buzzards.

We mix but we do not always blend. South Florida swells with caricatures and contradictions, unlikely people and situations, as well as exceptional natural beauty and extraordinary human beings.

We like to manufacture fireworks and to drink deeply from the handiest ferment, making almost anything possible. We commute with the flair of roller-coaster riders. We are dancing eccentrics, earnest homesteaders, smiling predators, blinking snowbirds, puzzled Crackers, ensnared strangers who intended only to pass through, and ministers of sunshine.

For an artist, we offer a blitz of moving, changing sensations geared to an outdoor stage. There are feathers of inspiration on every breeze. But for art itself, there is a certain popular resistance. It takes a long while to get past the magical certainties of the ticking clock.

We seem to prefer our arts raw and ephemeral, in clouds and sand castles, and 30-day classics, in Christo whimsies and *Miami Vice* dalliances, neat, brief, crisp, sunny for others but a bit on the shady side for ourselves, with a dip of fashion and fad, taking care to avoid after-taste and introspection.

Art does not have to hang on a wall, of course, but it does involve capture. From the substance of life around him, an artist receives personal visions. His articulation of them, amounting to capture, alters reality for the rest of us.

So art has the potential of refreshing the spirit. It offers a legal and moral antidote to the perils of this time – stress, monotony, confusion, despair.

In South Florida, art ought to flourish. Altering reality is big business here. We have the ingredients for an appreciative marketplace.

But art, it seems to me, requires a responding capture of its own. For a moment or two, at least, there must be a kind of hypnosis at work. An uninterrupted transmission of the visions must take place. The music, the words, the images, the rhythms must have a chance to reveal the conception. Otherwise, nothing happens. Nothing has been altered. But something in our air, in the nature of this place that chooses to be rebellious but not necessarily for a cause, resists that.

A half million newcomers move to Florida every year and pure inertia, if nothing else, keeps them in a transient mood for awhile. The rest of us seem to catch it.

The geography, the big sky and the flat land and the wide ocean, coupled with the exotic plants, and their equivalent in people, suggest that this is only a class recess, play time. Nothing really counts. Rules are suspended. You can be a little crazy, if you wish, and it is alright.

Quiet places threaten us with contemplation, in itself a kind of capture. The calm of museums and galleries tends to make some of us nervous, as though something is buried there that has a profound and perhaps disturbing message. We do not care to look.

Art appreciation is a participation sport, but it is your mental muscle that does the participating, the most difficult one of all to flex.

An article in *The American Scholar* quoted Arthur Koestler as saying once that liking a writer and then meeting the writer is like loving goose liver and then meeting the goose. Not so with South Florida, I think. We love the goose and have not yet made up our mind about the goose liver.

Visitors in recent years have dubbed Miami, for example, as Beirut, Casablanca, Havana II, Marseilles, Babylon, The Last Frontier, The City of the Future, and even Norma Jean ready to blossom into Marilyn. They strain to find South Florida somewhere else, in some other pattern, and there is none. This is an original, a cultural six-pack with eclectic labels.

The British author Lawrence Durrell once suggested that such things as art and the institutional expressions of appreciation for it were a natural growth process, "...the important determinant of any culture is, after all, the spirit of the place," he wrote. "Just as one particular vineyard will always give you a special wine with discernible characteristics, so a Spain, an Italy, a Greece will always ... express itself through the human being just as it does through wildflowers."

The spirit of our place, and its culture, still evolves. Our wildflowers are exceedingly wild, and our discernible characteristics so far make up less a personality than a mélange. Our wine has not fully made up its mind yet, but the ferment continues, and it is making.

Art? We are full of it. Just wait.

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