



● "Monaco Reflecting Pools" at the Civic Center by Sarah Morris, 2005.

## It Takes a Village: Key Biscayne's Public Art

● ● Key Biscayne came late to the public art concept, which turns out to be a really good thing. For nothing would have destroyed that midway-between-hamlet-and-town that we call a village more than the 1970s trends that characterized Art in Public Places, when they first fired the hearts and skills of American artists. Some sculptors certainly were ready for the challenge, but they were few, and the initial pieces put on public display (paid for by Percent for Art funds) were too often arbitrary choices placed in arbitrary places.

Over the decades, public art as an idea has radically changed, been refined and then redefined. The days of arrogant "plop" art pieces are over.

The sensible and amiable contemporary idea is that the public monies from public construction should be set aside for site-specific artworks, works that take account of the history of a place, are created in open competition, with the winners judged by arts professionals.

Both Sarah Morris, a United Kingdom-born painter and filmmaker, and the Cuban-born José Bedía, arguably Miami's most famous resident artist, took their creative clues from the natural environment of Key Biscayne — from the air, the water, the wind and the fauna. These are heavy-duty muses for an artist, and they are aspects of island life that have always interacted on island sites. All the works are economical in terms of taking up vertical, that



is, human space, yet, as befits their subject matter, they occupy generous dimensions on the land.

The Morris piece, "Monaco Reflecting Pools," 2005, located on the Civic Center Oval, consists of two elegantly configured shallow pools, each tiled in a geometric pattern, each pattern with its own color way. They look like immersed abstract paintings, liable to change in hue and shape as the light and wind play upon their fluid surfaces. At night, when artificially lit, they look different yet again. Morris has created a contemplative spot — there are benches in the design — altering slightly the traditional nature of a village green though not its function as an open gathering place in the center of town.

Bedia's Key Biscayne works are physically more extensive than the Morris pools, and they delve deeper into the specifics of the island's ecology. Always sensitive to the allure of language, Bedia combines words with his distinctive figural style, here naming and depicting five creatures indigenous to the environment: the manatee, the manta ray, the anhinga bird, the butterfly and the barracuda. The images with their text, fashioned of brightly colored terrazzo, create mini-plazas along Crandon Boulevard, linking the area between the key's two parks, the County's Crandon Park and the state's Cape Florida.

Villagers moving along the spine of the island walk on the art, bicycle around it, jog over it. It's an inspired kind of land art, cautioning islanders about the fragility of the other creatures in their midst, instructing all who transverse the plazas that the familiar names of indigenous fauna have foreign origins. Bedia's plazas are stunning in their details, quiet in their impact, the sort of public art that bears repeating. There are current plans for the artist to add three more plazas to the overall streetscape.

As a subtropical island, one of those elongated, wind-swept sand dunes that make up the standard stuff of romantic dreamings, Key Biscayne's geography determined its history. Ponce de León discovered it, but with no gold there to plunder, it took several hundred more years before its value as the perfect place for a much-needed lighthouse was noted and acted upon. The names of the families that further pioneered its living space are familiar to history-minded Miamians: Davis, Munroe, Deering, Matheson.

Today, despite the key's high rise condos, the weekend traffic jams, its international fame as a resort — and even though it is only a bridge-span away from a buzzing metropolis — the village is somehow a far cry from urban. Nothing makes that more clear than its choices for public art.

—Helen L. Kohen



FROM TOP: "Manta Raya," "Barracuda" and "Maniti" by Jose Bedia, 2009, add color to the Bedia Plazas along Crandon Boulevard.