

Art exhibit honors lives lost from social injustice

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The works of Miami artist T. Elliott Mansa, shown in the LnS Gallery in Coconut Grove, owned by Sergio Cernuda.
ZACHARY BALBER *COURTESY OF LNS GALLERY*



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Sergio Cernuda is the owner of LnS Gallery in Coconut Grove. While you may recognize the name – his parents own the long-running Cernuda Arte in Coral Gables – Sergio Cernuda has come into his own in Miami’s art scene.

Cernuda confirms that having his gallery in Coconut Grove was completely intentional. “We opened the gallery four years ago this February in an area that, in the 1970s, was booming with gallery spaces,” he said.

Since the beginning, the mission was to showcase local Miami talent, and when his cousin introduced him to the work of T. Elliott Mansa, he was instantly hooked.

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“We started to have a conversation about his work and his vision. We loved the paintings and collages we’d seen on his website, so it was love at first site,” said Cernuda.

As they began to organize their curatorial program, Cernuda put Mansa high on their list of artists they wanted to showcase. They reached out to him and, over the course of two years, discussed both the gallery’s vision and how that fit with his work.

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At the time, Mansa, was finishing up his MFA degree from CUNY-Hunter College which he received in 2018. Once he moved back to Miami, plans began for his show at LnS Gallery.

Originally the show “For Those Gathered in the Wind” was set to open this year in May but, because of Covid, it was delayed to December. The show is now open and features more pieces than originally planned with a total of 37 on display.

It is the message behind the artist’s work, as well as its beauty, that drew – and still draws – Sergio Cernuda to it.

“We’re incredibly pleased and honored to showcase the work because as a gallery we strive to work with artists whose message and idea represent the moment we live in and Mansa is a perfect representation of that,” said Cernuda.

Mansa’s journey to create his thought-provoking work was a winding road beginning with his educational journey, studying at the Yale School of Art, Maryland Institute College of Art, and University of Florida, where he received his BFA degree.

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Prior to leaving Miami to head to graduate school in New York City, Mansa was working independently without gallery representation. He gained momentum

through is pop-up exhibits with a group of artists around Miami. It was then he met mentors willing to step in and help.

“Those mentors saw we were a talented group of artists and eventually, that’s how this solo show happened with LnS Gallery,” said Mansa.

His work evolved over the years, from figurative portraiture, which was his background, to his current assemblage practice that incorporates materials from roadside memorials, applying ritual practices from West African, Caribbean, and Southern religious and vernacular sculptural traditions.

Although he received favorable reactions to his work, Mansa was feeling stifled as a figurative artist, as if he had reached a ceiling. He describes it as “feeling almost like a prison, because I wanted more from the work and from myself.”

That is when he decided to go back to school and going back as an adult, he knew he needed to get the most of out it, especially due to the inevitable debt he would incur.

He got to CUNY in New York, working on his portraiture work when a professor stopped him in his tracks telling him, “this is vanity. Here, we work on ideas and we’re not going to talk about how you did this or that.” It got him realizing he did feel trapped with that kind of skill and representation.

It was then that he stepped out of his comfort zone, especially in 2013 with the murder of Trayvon Martin when people took to the streets and he witnessed a movement happening. He really began to question the role of art.

“I saw people putting their bodies on the line, so I began questioning me just working in my studio, so I began looking at examples of work made to change the community. That is when I discovered West African sculptures,” he said.

He traveled to the region and saw that works existed in the middle of streets and in front of people’s homes. He found the work stunning and began to explore how the

work was made, eventually discovering the approach was similar to the teachings in art school.

“I was exploring how the work was made and how it was communicating the ideas. For example, in the sculptures I would see strings that symbolized binding (as in slavery, bound and chained) and the idea that these sculptures would bind your enemy. The string kind of told that fate,” he said.

Mansa saw similar themes incorporated into artworks when he traveled to Havana. They featured the same symbols and spiritual systems and, because of Miami’s Caribbean and Haitian influences, he saw the same here.

He began incorporating elements from roadside memorials in his pieces, using the aesthetic and West African sculptural practices. It was his way of synthesizing a new art and allowed him to “operate as if he could protect, honor, and defend the names of those who have lost their lives through state violence” he said.

Coming full circle to his current exhibit at LnS and its opening, delayed to December, allowed him to explore and dig deeper. It helped him look at, “the blind spots in my work and what I was *not* seeing. Helped me look at what I could do differently and that helped round out the exhibit and make for a stronger show,” explains Mansa.

Also, when he and Cernuda first met in New York, they quickly realized they shared the same vision and that made bringing the exhibit together smoother. Both gallery owner and artist say communication through the entire process has been amazing.

“We’ve got wall texts, a catalog, and so much done by the curatorial team which is incredibly generous. It’s really more like what you would find in a Museum show,” said Mansa. “With LnS, we have a very clear understanding and a constant dialogue, something I really appreciate.”

In total, the show includes 37 pieces, 22 of them are assemblages, incorporating those mentioned found objects, and the other 15 are the spirit jugs, bottles dipped in ceramics in which Mansa positions found objects on the clay.

Showcasing the intricate pieces in his gallery for all to experience are what Cernuda lives for. “Art and culture are fundamental and what unites us, and galleries are spaces where this dialogue is important to have. They are fundamental spaces in neighborhoods and communities to have discussions on issues that are surrounding us,” he said.

WHAT: *“For Those Gathered in the Wind: A Solo Exhibition by T. Elliott Mansa”*

WHEN: *Through Feb. 7, 2021*

WHERE: *LnS Gallery at 2610 SW 28 Ln.*

SAFETY PROTOCOLS: *A ticket reservation is required to ensure limiting of crowds and social distancing.*

INFORMATION: 305-987-5642; lnsgallery.com

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