

DOUBLE DUTY

Guerra, 39, and de la Paz, 52, work almost entirely with recycled materials. Most of the clothing in Flower Children and their other works is Dumpster-bound, from a warehouse near their Little Haiti studio that ships clothing to the Caribbean and Russia. They sift through a 10- to 15-foot pile, sometimes twice a day, once coming across an Escada dress with the tag still on it. "It's amazing," marvels de la Paz at their studio, sipping Coke, one of four cans he'll drink today (down from 12 -- in his defense, he doesn't drink coffee.) "The piles of clothes inspired landscapes, they've inspired figures, they've inspired abstract works."

Like so many local artists, they are also inspired by South Florida's natural landscape. One particularly stunning vista, Oasis, was exhibited last summer at the Chicago Cultural Center (a version of the work was on view during Art Basel Miami Beach in December). Seemingly endless garments in myriad shades of brown were knotted together and tied to ceiling rafters, forming massive banyan trees. Grass and flowers (little girls' socks) sprouted up around them, along with rocks and pebbles (bundles of sweaters) surrounding a shimmering pool blue pond (lamé, sequins, silk).

"For the time that you're in that space, you forget about everything else that's in the building," says Sofia Zutautas, the Chicago Cultural Center assistant curator who oversaw the installation. "Personally, I felt like sitting under one of those trees and taking a nap." Their clothing sculptures succeed on multiple levels, she says. They are at once childlike and sobering, with messages about environmentalism and consumerism.

Physically, it is enormously labor-intensive; they've recently started seeing a chiropractor to ward off repetitive stress injuries from spending countless hours tying tiny knots and twisting strips of fabric into intricate designs. They also say they've developed dust allergies working with the used clothing. Still, they find it more satisfying and spiritual than painting, which is what they were both doing when they met.

JOINING FORCES

When they decided to share a studio 11 years ago, mostly because they couldn't afford their own, they weren't planning to work together. After offering each other unsolicited advice a few too many times, the duo realized their aesthetics were so in sync that they abandoned their individual careers. They have functioned as Guerra de la Paz ever since.

"A lot of people think we're a woman," says Guerra, smiling. "The first name ends in an a," offers de la Paz. Once at a gallery in the Hamptons in New York, they overheard two women talking about how much they loved "her" work.

Their name is Spanish for "war of the peace," and they say it's no small part of why -- and how -- they work together.

"That was our first piece -- coming up with the name," says Guerra. "We kind of focus on very dark subjects, and then we focus on uplifting subjects," says de la Paz. "It's almost like



For as long as Guerra and de la Paz have worked together, they've also been a couple. "I think what has enabled us to stay together is our work," says de la Paz. "Like every other couple, we've gone through really good times and really bad times. And our work as always been constant, regardless of what our personal situation has been like."

Both their relationship and their art form have been serendipitous. Walking around the neighborhood, they'd see discarded clothing. "The clothing would get caught in the barbed wire, and then the elements would rip and fray it, and it would start looking like this tortured soul," remembers Guerra. "It had an urgent message about society and oppression," adds de la Paz.

"You can almost feel the human presence," says Zutautas, the Chicago curator. "These clothes belonged to somebody, defined people at one point, and then they were discarded and became something else. It's like remnants of identity. You know, we are all going to die, ashes to ashes, and become something different."



THE ART COUPLE:

Collectively known as Guerra de la Paz these artists are whimsical and subversive

ALICIA ZUCKERMAN Special to The Miami Herald

A little more than five years ago at an event during the first Art Basel Miami Beach, artists Alain Guerra and Neraldo de la Paz showed up in head-turning attire. Guerra sported a fluorescent geometric short-waisted sleeveless sweater over a multicolored pinstriped dress shirt, a bow tie, tapered seersucker pants, and fluorescent pink socks. De la Paz was a tad more conservative in a vintage fitted tuxedo with cut-off sleeves revealing a burgundy lining, over a white dress shirt, onyx cuff...

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"People were coming up to us saying, 'I really love what you're wearing. Who is it?'" Guerra recalls. "We'd tell them we got it in the trash. And they'd give us dirty looks."

The Cuban-born artists, known together as Guerra de la Paz, would be less likely to encounter such harsh reactions today. Their striking sculptures -- lush, tropical landscapes to entire families made from used T-shirts, ties, saris and socks -- have since appeared throughout Miami, as well as in Chicago and New York.

TWO FOR THE SHOW

Their latest installation, Flower Children, is on display through Saturday at Carol Jazzar Home Gallery near Miami Shores. Two

garage with a vaulted, barn-like ceiling. Shiny purple and red flower petals, remnants of Halloween costumes, protrude from their heads. She's in a frilly pink dress and red boots; her brightly-colored striped arms end in flower petals, instead of hands. He's wearing cargo jeans, a knit button-down vest with big squares of bright colors, and his pink and white striped arms are the legs of an old doll. They're on a lawn of embroidered daisies, surrounded by a white picket fence.

There is a whimsical, cartoon-like quality, simple enough on the surface, with a subversive undercurrent. Maybe it's because they don't have facial features. His face is a pink and white crocheted doily; hers, a rainbow-colored crocheted hat. Look closely: There's a stain on his right leg, a tear near his back pocket.

Flower Children is about connecting to nature, and to "the mind-set of the hippies," says de la Paz, standing over the installation. It's about striving for 1960s "anti-racism, anti-establishment, anti-bureaucracy, anti-war" ideals. Beyond that, he explains, the iconic white picket fence represents a false sense of security -- the notion that everything inside the home is fine, even if it's not.

Gallery owner Carol Jazzar also points to an inherent gender dynamic. "The boy is standing firmly on his feet -- he's looking up, toward the future in a proud and powerful attitude. The girl is sitting down. Her hand is on her lap, and her face is looking down: she's more or less submissive."