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Vol. 2 No. 4

The Art Issue:

Basel and Beyond: The season's most promising museum and gallery shows **Arquitectonica**

Rising: How five young architects invented the '80s **Interview:**

Miami Art Museum
Director Terence Riley



Art Matters

Enrique Martínez Celaya's work addresses the essential questions of life.

BRANCHING OUT

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY'S ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF THE TREES GIVES INTERIOR DESIGNERS A CHANCE TO APPLY THEIR TALENTS IN NOVEL WAYS—AND HELP THE PROFESSION GROW.

By Brett O'Bourke

In a season that sizzles with Art Basel, gala openings, and VIP receptions, Florida International University's "Festival of the Trees"—the annual design competition that celebrates its 20th anniversary this year—suggests an event that's downright quaint. Not so.

Witness last year's winner, designed by TSAO Design Group: a huge cube, strung with nearly a thousand silver-bead chains (like the ones you pull to operate a ceiling fan), its center cut into a cone tall enough to walk into, the whole thing shimmying like a showgirl. A bit less high-concept was design firm RTKL's replica of the popular children's stacking toy, with large, brightly painted inner tubes for rings.

Florida International University began the festival—which pairs a sponsor with a designer or architect to create a sculpture that in some way relates to the idea of a tree—as a way to connect design professionals with students. It has since morphed into a successful fund-raiser and competition (one tree is chosen by a panel of judges as best in show), as well as a favorite gathering among Miami's design community.

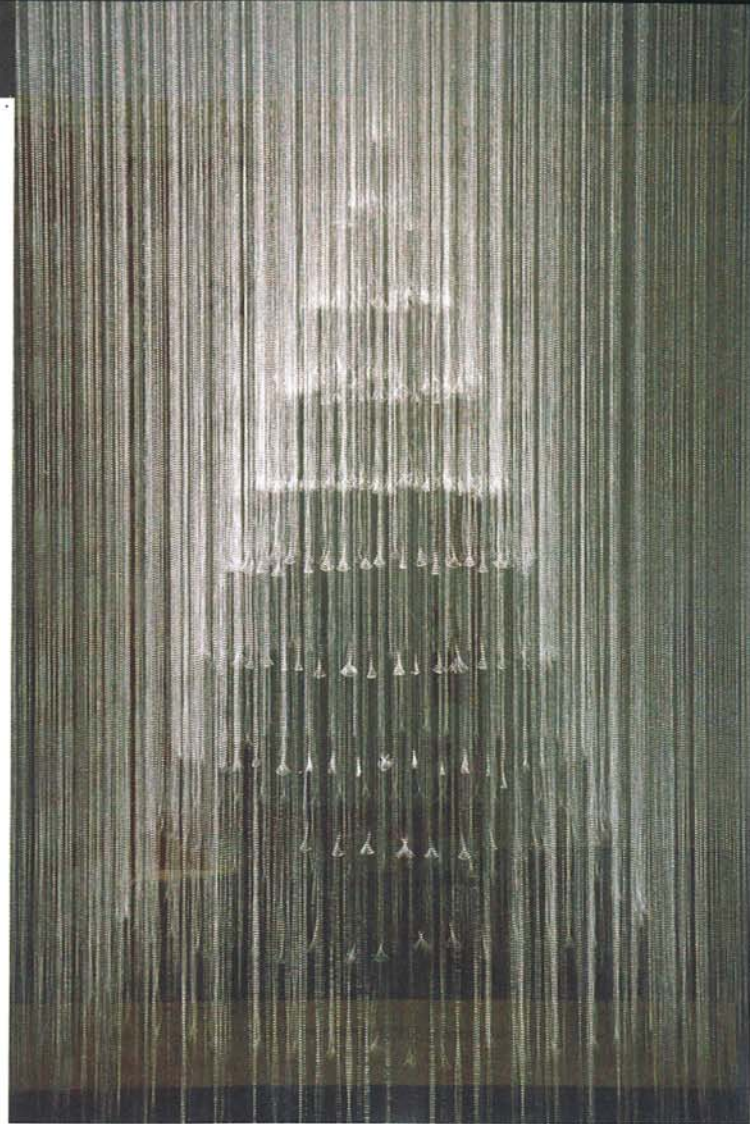
"It's a great kickoff to the holiday season," says Michael Wolk, the



Last year's winner, by TSAO Design Group, top; RTKL's 2005 entry, above

well-known interior designer, speaking from his office near Wynwood. "We all get so busy with our own work. The architects and designers, we have our own trade associations; we don't mix often enough. This has become a great opportunity to connect and socialize, and for a good cause."

The cause is a scholarship fund



for the FIU School of Architecture's Interior Design Program. The festival, for which corporate sponsors pony up \$3,000 to take part, has raised more than \$100,000 over the last five years, according to program chairwoman Janine King. This year, organizers are hoping to land 20 sponsors and 20 trees.

For the first time, several trees will be auctioned off during the November 30 preview gala; it's a nod to the idea of sustainability. "We have some really beautiful work that sometimes winds up in the garbage or shoved in a closet," says King. "This might give some of them a life after the event."

Sculptures range from whimsical (à la RTKL's homage to kiddie toys) to topical (King says she won't be surprised if one of this year's entries makes some comment on the war in Iraq) to abstract. The only thing that is assured is "no one is going to show up with a Victorian Christmas tree, though the building puts up its own Christmas tree which makes a nice backdrop," says King.

Some firms hold interoffice competitions for designs, others

design communally. (Thanks to a growing number of local FIU design alumni, several sponsors and firms are offering FIU students the opportunity to design and build trees of their own.) And then some designs literally just happen. Tom Graboski, a Coral Gables-based graphic designer who has been involved with the festival since its inception, says one year he found something on the side of the road that so captivated him that he made one or two subtle changes to it, then made it his entry.

That's exactly the kind of serendipity that may have pushed last year's winner into the top spot. The story goes that someone inadvertently bumped into the frame while they were working on it, creating a ripple effect. The builders then ran out and bought a small machine that would shake the tree constantly, creating its irresistible silver sway.

Festival of the Trees will be on the display in the lobby of One Brickell Square, 801 Brickell Avenue, Miami. Admission is free seven days a week; November 30 through December 28.