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An Artist Excavates the Past Lives of a Gallery's Building

Leyla Cárdenas examines the physical and historical layers of the spaces in which she works, studying their fragments and the experiences lived therein.

Monica Uszerowicz | 2 days ago



Installation view of *Leyla Cárdenas: Vice Versa* at Dimensions Variable, Miami (all images by Francesco Casale unless otherwise noted)

MIAMI — The Pacific Building, a 15-story structure once located in downtown Miami, looked mostly like an austere breadbox, save for its dramatic Moorish archways and entrances at street level. It sustained some damage in a 1926 hurricane, and was ultimately leveled in 1970 to make room for the Wolfson Campus of what was then known as Miami-Dade Junior College — now Miami-Dade College.

Wolfson Campus soon became home to the Frances Wolfson Gallery, which featured works by artists like Ana Mendieta (her film “Ochún” was part of Latin American Art: A Woman’s View, a 1981 exhibition). In the mid-’90s it became the Centre Gallery — until December 2015, when Dimensions Variable (DV) pledged an eight-year commitment to implement its own programming.



Leyla Cárdenas, “Some other beginning’s end” (2017), site-specific photo transfer

For the space’s first official long-term exhibition — following a soft opening during Miami Art Week over a year ago — the work of Leyla Cárdenas makes sense. During the past several years, the Colombian-born artist has examined the physical and historical layers of the spaces in which she works, studying their fragments and the experiences lived therein. The results are sculptural — the room itself becoming a kind of tableau of its own history — and the visual revelations are often forgotten narratives. How, she asks, does architecture conceal or expose a city’s detritus?

The Wolfson/Centre Gallery was vital to the city and to Latin American artists around the globe, as it was primarily dedicated to showcasing works by artists from Black and Latino communities and provided a cultural center for Miami-Dade students. Cárdenas pays tribute to this legacy, of which DV is now a part, with *Vice Versa*, an exhibition named named for how she works backward through history: stripping layers to bring the buried to the surface, revealing the significance of a space's skin.

Upon Cárdenas's arrival, DV was undergoing renovation; she dug through the construction and concurrently explored the archives at [HistoryMiami](#) to understand the building's timeline. At the space's entrance, an image of the Pacific Building's demolition is stark. After finding this photo at HistoryMiami — shot by Gus Schuettler for *The Miami Herald* — Cárdenas created a mirrored version of the photographic transfer, then ripped two identical pieces of the image, allowing the half-torn threads of paper to hang precariously. What's left in their place are white holes, ghostly shadows. Entitled "Some other beginning's end," a drawn line on the wall extends from the piece and wraps around the perimeter of the room, punctuated by more images, each transferred from photographs of the demolition. They are held up, delicately, with pins.



Leyla Cárdenas, "Reversed" (2017), peeled paint from previous walls

Move from this timeline and you'll step into another: flattened hunks of peeled paint from the gallery's former walls, placed on the floor and adorned with smiley faces, peace signs, hearts — bright doodles, presumably made by college students decades ago. The playful wall markings are like cave paintings, and it wouldn't be hyperbole to deem Cárdenas an archaeologist. Over time, the symbols have become red and purple, and they bleed like spray paint.

Above them is an unexpectedly beautiful set of peeled paint shards, glued like wavelengths onto the wall in varying linear patterns. The gallery's former walls were caked with layers of paint, and Cárdenas sanded several pieces of removed detritus to reveal these records of exhibitions past. The colors — aqua, purple, pink — are etiolated but still visible, and they cast a preternatural glow behind them, like dimmed lights in Easter-egg shades.



Leyla Cárdenas, "Stratum" (2017) (detail), peeled paint from previous baseboards

In spite of the dense materials at hand, Cárdenas doesn't utilize heavy tools to make her subtle excavations — instead, she's more like a chemist, employing small, fine materials to dig carefully. For "Stratum," a linear chunk of paint that extends nearly the length of the room, she glued a thin piece of linen to the room's former baseboard, applied warmth with a heat gun, and slowly peeled (or unpeeled) the layers of paint until they frayed into strips. These, too, are dotted with sweetly hued pastels.

Curious about the history of these softly colored walls, DV curators Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova did a bit of research. They discovered that in photographs of a 1999 exhibition at the Centre Gallery, *The Abject Body: Notes on Abjection and Prejudice*, the bottom half of the walls had been painted a soft teal — the color Cárdenas found while mining the room. Inadvertently, a history of the gallery has been revealed, the room functioning as a palimpsest.

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Leyla Cárdenas, “Wolfson’s Stratigraphy” (2017) (detail), peeled paint from previous walls, site-specific intervention (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

While Cárdenas was putting the show together, I visited the space, where she told me that her focus is “to learn from architectural traces. Where are we standing? That’s an interesting question. If you start asking these questions, you inevitably need to look at geology, how Miami started, its previous populations. It’s a very big history implied in this open question, but of course, you are asking it with millimeters of accumulated paint in a downtown gallery.” After the show is taken down, “Some other beginning’s end” — the photographic transfer of the Pacific Building — will get painted over, hidden in the wall of this new gallery as a new layer, perhaps for someone else to uncover.

[Leyla Cárdenas: Vice Versa continues at Dimensions Variable \(300 Northeast 2nd Avenue, MDC Building 1, 3rd Floor, Miami\) through March 31.](#)

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