

## Outside the box, in art and life

- Photos

- BY LYDIA MARTIN

LMARTIN@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Early each morning, accompanied by her fluffy white Maltese, Coco, Lydia Rubio dives head first into her strangeness. The feeling of otherness may be common among artists involved in the lonely, uncharted task of creating. But Rubio feels her isolation acutely.

Especially right now, as she toils in the silence of her home studio even before her Coral Way neighbors awaken and start heading to work. She's racing to finish paintings and drawings for an October show at Montreal's Beaux Arts des Ameriques gallery.

"The title of the show is *The Foreigner*. But the word in French may be better. It's *étranger*, which suggests both strange and foreign at the same time. In a sense, that's the way I have always felt. Like I don't fit in anywhere," says Rubio, 63, who has taken to wearing sparkling white clothes to match her sparkling white hair. White is cleaner, she says, because you can't take bleach to colors.

Rubio, who recently completed dramatic gates for the 15-acre Women's Park at West Flagler Street and 102nd Avenue -- mythological figures of women representing the concepts of courage, love and wisdom -- was a Harvard-educated architect and teacher of design and visual thinking before she gave up that structured life in the early 1980s to become an artist. Her life has been equal parts bliss and struggle ever since.

"I don't mean that I'm an outsider artist, but I do consider my work to be outside certain contemporary tendencies," Rubio says over Spanish tapas and red wine at her favorite neighborhood spot, Xixón on Coral Way. She may feel alien within her world, but she's hardly a recluse. Her art- and book-filled little house brims with artists and intellectuals on occasional Friday nights.

"I also feel like an outsider within my family. They still don't understand my choice to be an artist. They wanted me to stay an architect. Or even, just be a married woman with children. In photos of me from when I was 1 or 2, I already look like a stranger. I'm looking at people as if I were from another planet. And I think I've had that look ever since."

Rubio is tackling those ideas as she prepares her upcoming show. Prominent is the repeated figure of a woman, sometimes half dressed, sometimes nude, who takes on labors akin to those of Hercules: carrying an island, dragging a boat, flying overhead while pulling a landscape.

### INSPIRED BY WORDS

As always, Rubio, a voracious lover of literature, especially poetry, has found her inspiration in words:

"The foreigner asks for a drink/  
Of water/  
A bit of earth/  
Floating in the stormy wind/  
Of her exile/  
She drifts/  
Toward the life/  
Of her invented world/  
Conjuring a tiny island/  
She makes a map,  
Geographies,  
Tattoos/  
Of her pain."

"It's by a Chilean poet, Marjorie Agosin, a friend and a professor of Spanish at Wellesley," Rubio says. "I feel like a foreigner, or an *extranjera* even, because I'm gay. Even in Miami I feel like a foreigner because I was born in Cuba and lived in Puerto Rico, Italy, Boston, New York. When I came to Miami 20 years ago, I found people who had never lived anywhere else but here. Their only point of reference was Miami. Miami has never been my point of reference. And I'm a Cuban artist, but I'm not in a lot of Cuban collections. Hispanic collectors don't really know my work because I went to the side of American galleries. And because I reject some of the tendencies of contemporary art, that makes me a sort of outcast in the mainstream art world, too."

Not that she has not been successful. Her works are in several private collections, as well as the permanent collections of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, the University of Southern California, the Wolfsonian-FIU, the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, Bryn Mawr College and Lehigh University. She has two major public art projects in Miami: the Women's Park gates and *All Night Long, We Heard Birds Passing*, a multimedia installation of sculpture, painting and text that went up at the Port of Miami's terminal 3 in 2002.

She also has just created monumental works for the Raleigh-Durham International Airport. *Gate of Earth* in the north terminal, a giant aluminum-and-steel tree that starts outside and appears to branch through glass into the airport, was completed in 2008. *Gate of Air* in the south terminal, featuring a giant spiral that emerges from a seashell, should be up in another year, Rubio says.

"Lydia is an artist at the peak of her career," says Michael Spring, director of Miami-Dade County's cultural affairs department, which is in charge of public art projects. "We were thrilled to have an artist of her caliber and talent. . . . In those gates at the Women's Park, we have one of the strongest works in the county's public-art collection. It's powerful, eloquent work."

And yet Rubio feels left out because local museums, she says, won't pay attention to her work. She says that one museum director told her she needed to jump on the current bandwagon, especially since she's an architect, and start doing architectural paintings that would be commentaries on Miami as an urban center.

Rubio is the first to say her work is influenced by her sense of space and scale, something she learned in architecture school. But. . . .

"All the Miami artists are doing commentary on Miami as an urban center right now. I'm not going to do it precisely because I'm being told that I need to," says Rubio, who spent a year in Florence studying architecture and is still highly influenced by that city's Renaissance art. "A lot of the work in the contemporary art world is referring to commercial design, to the pop. But it is often without filters. I do believe in filters. I believe in rigor. If I were a videographer or photographer who knew her craft, I would be offended by some of the use of photography and video I see in galleries today. The work is not rigorous enough."

## **MULTI-FACETED WORK**

Rubio's sense of multimedia is more in line with, say, that of Leonardo da Vinci. She paints; she sculpts. She incorporates language and calligraphy into her works. And she documents her process in beautiful, often hand-bound books that become part of the greater work. Several are in major book collections.

"In contemporary art today, everything is repeat, repeat, repeat. It's the basic nature of marketing. Artists are forced into boxes because they made a certain thing that sells. To me, repetition is the death of an artist. Serious art to me is an investigative process. If my life changes, my art has to change," Rubio says.

Even without the mainstream recognition she would ultimately like, Rubio is more upbeat than ever about her career, she says.

"To be an artist you have to be fearless. And I was when I gave up the architecture career. But I still am. I don't have any real savings, and I'm 63. But I have given all of myself to art, and I really believe that this is my time. I'm ready to make the big leap."