

Miami Herald

Ladd Brothers weave life and art at Miami-Dade College Museum of Art + Design

By: Anne Tschida
February 26, 2016



The Brothers Ladd: Steven and William Ladd, whose work is on display at Miami-Dade College Museum of Art & Design through March 27, 2016. MIAMI-DADE COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART & DESIGN

“Steven and William Ladd: Mary Queen of the Universe” doesn’t sound like a typical art exhibition, and it isn’t. It’s a collaborative show, and not just because the two artists are brothers. The works in the galleries at MDC Museum of Art + Design (MOAD) draw from a wide variety of materials, craft, childhood memories and at times with the help of children and female inmates. (MOAD’s director, Jeremy Mikolajczak, was announced as the new director of the Tucson Museum of Art.)

Bright colors and fabric saturate the huge galleries on the second floor of the Freedom Tower. Most of the pieces are gridded sculptural boxes lined up on the walls, each one with a color scheme, and with such fanciful names as 1960s TV Dinners, Pink Cadillac and Tweety Bird. Each rectangular work is made up of smaller box squares, in which tightly bound fabric rolls are packed, with splashes of sparkling objects adorning them, made from gems, belt buckles, beads and buttons. The individual sculptures might be stuffed with yellow rolls, another

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with red rolls, another purple rolls (yes, visually, you can think of a sushi tray), all richly and deeply colored.

They are such delightful, tactile works it will be hard to keep your hands off of them.

The sets hanging on the walls are meant to be deconstructed “towers,” the sections revealing these mini landscapes, unwrapped like a present. And the sections all have their own stories, based on the New York-based brothers’ childhood memories in St. Louis.



Installation view of “Steven and William Ladd: Mary Queen of the Universe” at Miami-Dade College Museum of Art & Design through March 27, 2016. MIAMI-DADE COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART & DESIGN

So for instance, the yellow sculpture Tweety Bird refers to an uncomfortable Halloween when Steven was in first grade. His mother lovingly created an elaborate costume for him, of Tweety Bird — and the resulting embarrassment of having to walk around school in the fluffy yellow outfit apparently left him traumatized.

The gorgeous red sculpture The Heat Is On is a nod to the 1985 World Series with the St. Louis Cardinals, whose logo is famously bright red. That year the city went crazy over the interstate series against the Kansas City Royals, and the The Heat Is On song by former Eagles Glenn Frey (who died in January) blared through the streets.

The lush, dark black sculpture sprinkled with metallic beads Do This in Remembrance of Me is a reference to the Catholic liturgy the boys sat through. At the most solemn time of the service, with its rituals and chanting, Steven and William imagined they were witnessing musical comedy. Other sculptures harken back to trips to Hawaii and the chocolate capital, Hershey, Pennsylvania.

These are very specific episodes — not dark, vague or hazy dreams — culled from the early lives of the brothers. Recalling them became part of the 13-year project that would result in this exhibition, organized by the Parrish Art Museum in the Hamptons in New York.

According to the Ladds, they had been creating their scroll sculptures, organized by color, when they started

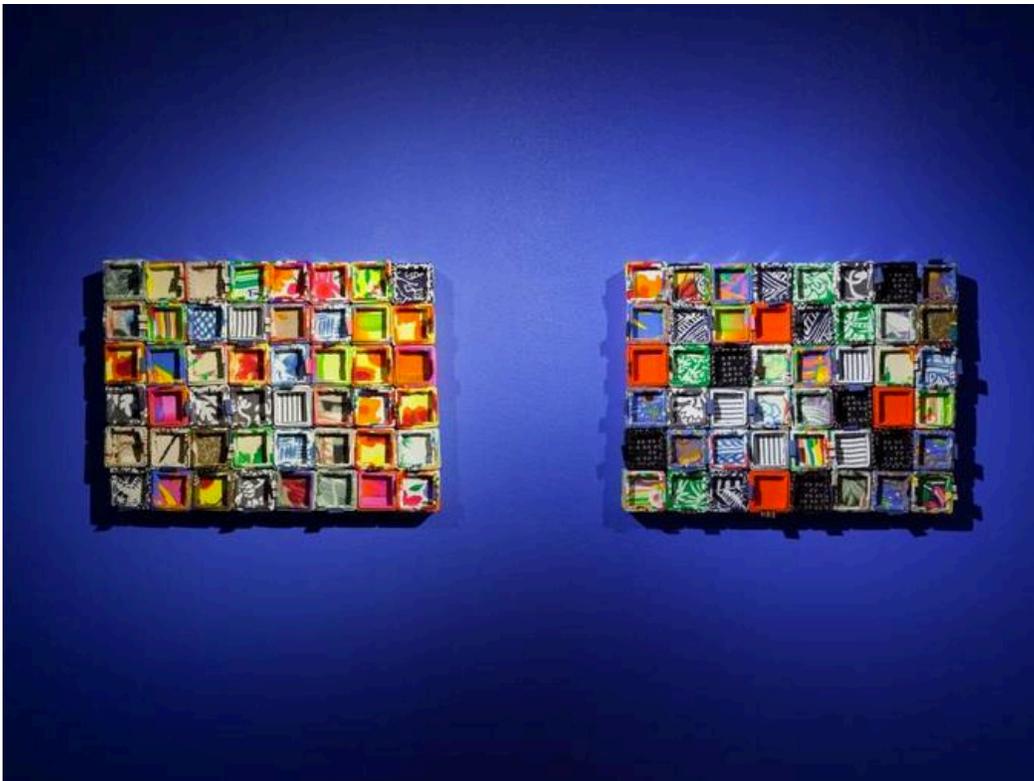
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trading memories. In the attractive, nicely illustrated catalog that accompanies the show, they describe the “unstacking” of these memory towers and stitching themes together. “What do each color and each box really represent? We love the beautiful scroll landscapes, but what do they mean to us? What is that memory? Through these conversations we came up with the titles. Each color triggers a story.”

“Mary Queen of the Universe” is a very personal family affair, involving church and community, with their mother playing a big part in these childhood memory artworks stemming from the 1980s. But after leaving St. Louis, the brothers did go their separate ways, with Steven focusing on theater, costuming and fashion design, and William on performance and an obsession with beading. Neither is an art school grad. They reconnected in the burgeoning art hub of Brooklyn in 1999, and started meshing their love of sewing, beading and weaving, using recycled and found materials.

The aesthetic of this background is abundantly clear in the pieces, which fudge lines between fashion and fine art, between decorative and abstraction.

Aside from the predominating scroll sculptures, there are also drawings. One set called Four Square is eloquent and lovely. Again arranged in a grid, this series of little stacked squares is not made from fabric but ink. Within each one of these squares, there is a single square made from metal trinkets that juts out from the paper, giving it a slight 3-D quality. Like the other drawings, they are so beautifully executed you would not know they are not textile works unless you look closely.



Miami-Dade College Museum of Art & Design Works from “Steven and William Ladd: Mary Queen of the Universe.”

The exhibit also includes maquettes of some of the works and fabric-based books.

This almost bucolic trip through MOAD is interrupted by the biggest, most spectacular display, and it is jarring. In the center gallery, its soaring white walls are covered with black-and-white grids, made from paper and ink, each square containing tiny depictions of ants in row after row. Where did this come from? This landscape, devoid mostly of color, is darker than the rest of the show. Titled Ant Epidemic, you feel consumed by an insect invasion.

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From “Steven and William Ladd: Mary Queen of the Universe” at Miami-Dade College Museum of Art & Design through March 27, 2016. MIAMI-DADE COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART & DESIGN

Sitting on the floor in the middle of the room is the masterpiece of the entire exhibit, Faith. Potted in 36 boxes are again fabric scrolls, this time dark green, with black-beaded trees sprouting from this garden and striking orange glasswork flames planted throughout, surrounded again by ants. The piece, with its color combination, composition and intricate detailing, is simply exquisite.

And Faith does have a darker soul. According to the Ladd brothers — a year apart in age — the mysterious creek behind their school was an off-limits frontier, where they were banned from playing or exploring. Was it because the area was infested by creatures, or because bigger, bad boys hung out there? They would never know.

As beautifully crafted as the vibrant, exuberant works in “Mary Queen” are, this room has a potency — of unease, of mystery — that the other rooms don’t muster.

But then, the Ladd brothers’ real interest is not in plumbing lonely, somber places; rather the opposite. In 2006, they set up a program to engage school children, kids with special needs and women inmates at Rikers Island Correctional Facility in New York in the collaborative process of art-making. Using recycled materials, they learn to make the scrolls that the Ladds invented, during what they call Scrollathons. In the spirit of those Scrollathons, Steven and William Ladd returned to Miami last week for a two-week stint, visiting YWCAs, the Overtown Youth Center, the Miami Rescue Mission and several elementary schools.