

The Miami Herald > Opinion > Columnists > Fabiola Santiago

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IN MY OPINION

## Art Basel holds lessons for Florida's governor

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Somebody ought to buy Gov. Rick Scott plane fare and a \$40 day-ticket to Art Basel Miami Beach so that the penny-pincher can see what a liberal arts education can earn and buy you.

A skinflint when it comes to funding education and teachers but generous when it comes to cutting corporate taxes, the Republican governor could use some fine arts lessons by way of a guided tour of our metropolis at its finest hour.

But make it a day trip.

Sorry, no vacancy. Hotel rooms are booked at the highest rates of the season because a love of the arts brings out the world's high-rolling art collectors to town, those who leave their money in the city's tax-paying business establishments and ship home oversized parcels with paintings, sculpture, photography, video and even room-sized art installations.

As it turns out, the liberal-arts-loving types who descend upon us every year on the first weekend in December — fueling an art industry in South Florida that churns year-round — are big thinkers and big spenders.

They travel by private jet and first class, sip champagne as they study investing in art — and adore that poetry our governor finds so unnecessary in school curriculums.

They like poetry in their art, poetry in the design of their meals by our cities' top chefs, and they even love poetry on their hotel beds.

At the perennially sold-out \$325-plus a night **Betsy Hotel on South Beach**, guests are treated to poetry readings and the turn-down service includes scented bookmarks inscribed with lines of poetry and left on the pillows.

The poetry — written by Pulitzer finalist Hyam Plutzik, the owner's father — earned the Betsy a prime spot in last weekend's Wall Street Journal's short-list of "culture-focused hotels." The Ocean Drive gem is in good literary company with hotels in New York, San Francisco, Paris and Marrakech.

See how far poetry can take you, governor?

Perhaps joining the Basel crowd for a tour of Miami's artist studios and exhibition spaces in Wynwood and the Design District might further help enhance the view.

While there's still much room for improvement and the recession has hit hard, the arts districts are home to the gainfully employed via liberal arts curriculums.

Some of the most successful — artists Hernan Bas and Michael Vasquez, for example, whose evocative paintings have sold for \$100,000 and \$80,000, respectively — are graduates of the kind of public art school whose funds Gov. Scott has threatened to cut if the institutions don't demonstrate how fine-arts degrees make money.

"The misconception is that art can't be a career, but it can be so in so many different ways," says Maggy Cuesta, dean of visual arts for New World School of the Arts, which had to heavily fund-raise after state funding was slashed by a third two years in a row, even though the school is considered one of the top 100 in the nation.

"Not only do we graduate fine artists," Cuesta says, "but also gallery and museum directors, graphic designers and [skilled workers] in digital media."

New World students are in demand: 26 received \$9.8 million in scholarship offers; employers call the school wanting to hire students for their design skills, the most recent a Washington D.C. firm opening a branch in Miami.

And then, there's this unexpected twist: Two recent graduates went on to medical school.

"You never know what the art is going to do," Cuesta says. "Their love of art brings out their dedication and focus on their education."

That's another lesson for the governor, who wants to pit liberal arts against math, science and technology, fields to which he has said he will shift the state's education funds. But perhaps if the governor had a liberal arts education he might know that those fields he favors are integrated into the world of art, which is serious business.

Knowledge and a whole lot more is what a liberal arts education buys you.

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