



By Samantha Rojas



Whirls and Swirls and a Vortex on Water,' 2008, by Alice Aycock



'Island Garden,' 2009, by Lorna Jordan



Jack and Mary Downs stand in front of a 12-foot metal shear.

# MARINE MACHINE SHOP DISCOVERS NEW BUSINESS IN THE ARTS A SIGN OF THE TIMES?

At the site of the old Tomato Packing Plant in Dania — where in the 1920s, the yield of succulent tomatoes was so plentiful that Dania was known as the “Tomato Capital of the World” — metal fabricator Jack Downs and his team built artist Alice Aycock’s artwork “Whirls and Swirls and a Vortex on Water” and Lorna Jordan’s artwork “Island Garden.”

Jack and Mary Downs built their business, machine shop and fabrication shop over 32 years with equipment that includes a spectrum of machinery to accommodate the needs of the South Florida marine industry and beyond. Within the last five years, 50 percent of those needs have come from the creative industry.

It is the birthing place of three major public art commissions, two in Broward County and one in Tennessee, as well as many other smaller commissions. It is also the continued livelihood of 15 Broward County employees, many with a spouse and children.

A conversation with Downs, an ex-Army man, sailor, welder, boat-lover, boat-builder and local businessman about his last five years in the metal fabrication business easily sounds like a would-be excerpt from “The Art World of South Florida” if such

a publication were to exist. He regales stories of Alice Aycock, Henri Moretti, David Lloyd, Robbie Robins and Lorna Jordan — nationally and internationally known sculptors, some whom have created, designed, sweated and perfected their artwork in his shop. He has worked with artists from Slovenia, New York, San Francisco and Paris as well.

“None of these artists have anything in common with anybody else. That’s what it is. It’s interesting because it’s what’s in their head. I never try to second-guess an artist ... you’d never be right,” Downs said. “Nothing we do is plain vanilla.”

In 2007 he was contracted to participate in the fabrication of artist Lorna Jordan’s artwork sculpture “Island Garden” — an architectural sculpture that was completed this past August at Long Key Nature Center and Natural Area in Davie. Jordan designed a broad range of elements, such as pavilions, bridges, gathering

spaces, towers, pathways, gardens, water features and art elements around the site. Approximately 120 feet long by 88 feet wide, the visual interpretation of “Island Garden” is reminiscent of patterns in nature such as spirals, branches and partitions.

In 2007, Downs was awarded a significant contract by public artist Alice Aycock, for fabrication of an artwork for Central Broward Regional Park. The project would take a year and employ between 10 to 12 of his 15-member staff in the labor of design and fabrication, until its installation in 2008. It would fund the purchase of tools and product and hire employees and subcontractors, all generating stimulus into a slowing economy. Welder-fabricators, machinists, painters, mechanics, electricians, industrial designers and structural and civil engineers would work toward this aesthetic and functional park. It would keep them in jobs and keep their families stable.

Aycock’s public artwork “Whirls and Swirls and a Vortex on Water” was commissioned through Broward Cultural Division’s Public Art and Design Program and was installed at Central Broward Regional Park on the corner of State Road 7 and Sunrise Boulevard, at 3700 N.W. 11th Place in Lauderhill. Located over a



*'Island Garden,' 2009, by Lorna Jordan*

pool in the center of a grassy patch at the entrance to Broward County's one and only cricket field, the distinct artwork can be seen from the main roads of State Road 7 and Sunrise Boulevard.

The park is also home to two large artificial turf practice fields that can be split into four American football or soccer fields, or combined into two cricket pitches. It features standard playgrounds, a 1.5-mile walking trail and basketball, netball and tennis courts, and a water park, Tropical Splash – all new ideas and additions to this under-served community.

As artworks go, it had its skeptics. Those who complained about the cost forgot to mention the subcontractor and his local employees hired to fabricate and install this artwork, the local products purchased and the sector of local industry that was kept moving as a result of the building of a dream that would last for at least 100 years.

This contractor has since received another contract from Aycock to fabricate a sculpture for the University of Tennessee in Knoxville that was installed last July.

Somewhere in Broward County, contracts are being awarded – amidst a slew of dissolving commercial building and increased expenses coupled with decreasing sales that threaten local business and economy. Amidst the sight of residents closing doors with foreclosure signs on the front step comes one contractor and his employees who are surviving and creating, thanks to public art. The ripple effect to the aggregate – trips to local supermarkets and

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restaurants, retail stores and arts and cultural events – fuels the local economy.

If jobs are being created in a staggering economy and a percentage of business has shifted with timeout of naval contracting pursuits into creative ventures, does this matter to anyone? Should it be important that one marine metal fabricator, who once received 50 percent of gross sales (\$1 million to \$5 million annually) from a contract with the U.S. Navy, has now in the last five years gotten a new 50 percent through the creative industries of Broward County instead? Does it matter that a recent hire to Down's 15-person team was a graduate from the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale?

A county that hosts one of the biggest boat shows internationally is one where fabricators and designers for custom yachts supply a huge percentage of the carefully-crafted, ornamental

handiwork to these multi-million dollar boat owners. When this county makes the marginal shift from the naval industry into the creative industry through public art, it's interesting. New business is new business. Might Richard Florida's prediction of the next evolution of industry – out of technological and manufacturing, and into the creative, information economy – be accurate? ("The Rise of the Creative Class," by Richard Florida)

"New Times" reports that Florida's ideas on the "creative class," commercial innovation and regional development have been featured in major ad campaigns from BMW and Apple, and are being used globally to change the way regions and nations do business and transform their economies. Today, Broward County is in the process of writing its 2020 Community Cultural Plan, which will serve as a blueprint for the next 10 years. Should all these things be connected?

"People don't know anything unless they are told," Downs said. That may well be the moral of this story, if there is one. Jack Downs is the quintessential Broward County entrepreneur. He visits the boat shows annually; he talks with boat captains, fabricators, naval architects and machinists. Today, he talks with artists and designers, too. ☺



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Samantha Rojas is the public relations writer for Broward Cultural Division. She can be reached at [srojas@broward.org](mailto:srojas@broward.org).