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Palmetto



Bartram's Ixia ● FLOR500 Project ● Butterflies in Northeast Florida

500 Artists, Gardens Commemorate Florida's 500th Birthday

XAVIER CORTADA



Xavier Cortada, *Florida Mangrove*, 55" x 116", acrylic on canvas, 2003 (www.cortada.com).

When I started out as a professional artist in the mid-1990s, I would engage others in painting collaborative murals to amplify their voices.

I would bring people together in public spaces to address important social concerns: street children in Bolivia's main plaza; former gang members in a Northern Philly barrio; Greek and Turkish Cypriots at the UN Green Line; Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland; AIDS workers in South Africa; kids jailed in Miami's adult prisons and psychiatric facilities.

Years ago, I remember telling a journalist that I could never see myself painting flowers.

As I type this, there is still some paint on my right forearm. It's from

painting wildflowers. I guess I'm not a good fortune teller and can be a little careless when cleaning up.

In the studio, I'm creating the fifth of eight wildflower paintings that I am exhibiting across all corners of our state during 2013: I guess I see flowers differently now. Let's call it growth.

And there's a reason for that:

Wildflowers magically rise from the soil in a triumphant celebration of color and form. They are architectural masterpieces, miniature cathedrals. Ever building and ever decaying. And ever regenerating themselves again according to plan.

Wildflowers hold medicinal powers to combat diseases we have yet to encounter. To solve problems

we have yet begun to imagine.

Wildflowers allow the planet's pollinators, with whom they co-evolved through time, to fulfill their joint responsibility of sustaining life's fragile web. An intricate and complex biological process that makes Earth verdant, sustains all animals (including humans), and balances atmospheric gases (that accelerate global climate change).

Obviously, wildflowers would naturally continue to blanket our planet were it not for the displacement caused by the concrete we've poured and the parcels we've platted to build our homes and grow our society.

In the spring of 1513, with its flowers in full bloom, Juan Ponce de Leon landed his three ships on the

Below: René Lynch, "FLOR 61: American Lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*)" – Watercolor on Aquabord (clay coated Masonite), 24" x 36", 2012 (CC).

Carl Schwartz, "FLOR 372: Bandana-of-the-Everglades (*Canna flaccida*)" – acrylic, 16" x 12", 2012 (CC).



Above: April Sharpe, "FLOR 412: Wild Coco (*Eulophia alta*)" – mixed media on canvas, 30" x 36", 2012 (CC).

Chip Weston, "FLOR 238: Yellow Waterlily (*Nymphaea mexicana*)" – digital graphics, 10" x 8", 2012 (CC).

eastern shore of the peninsula where I live. Claiming the land for Spain, he named the place *La Florida*, (for the Spanish word *flor* or flower) because of the lush landscape and because of the day the explorers arrived, *Pascua Florida*, Easter.

As we commemorate the 500th anniversary of this encounter, I am working through the Florida International University College of Architecture + The Arts, where I serve as Artist-in-Residence, to develop FLOR500, a participatory art, nature, and history project that encourages participants to explore Florida's natural wonder.

Indeed, in developing the project, I wanted to create art that allowed our inhabitants to understand the multicultural

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origins of our state, its fragile biodiversity, and its threatened coastlines. So I took the father of the Fountain of Youth mythology and his historic milestone as a point of departure to explore ways of rejuvenating the Sunshine State.

This exploration wasn't solely mine; I wanted as many Floridians as possible to really understand it. So, I went big.

500 Flowers

My first step was to seek out biologists and botanists from across the state to identify the wildflowers that were around when Ponce de Leon and his crew first landed our shores. As the architect of the project, I gave some guidelines: I wanted a diversity of color, region, and size. I wanted to focus on everything from weeds to flowering trees, so that people understood the varieties of flowering plants in Florida. And I wanted 500 – one for every year of the anniversary.

Dr. Richard P. Wunderlin at the University of South Florida led the effort in selecting the 500 wildflowers. All 500 flowers featured on the project website link back to their respective pages in the Florida Atlas of Vascular Plants website he's developed, www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

500 Artists

I then invited 500 Florida artists to go out into their communities and find and depict those 500 flowers. Curators across eight regions are actively recruiting professional artists who will learn about these wildflowers and portray them for others to enjoy. Importantly, the artists license their artwork as creative commons so that schools and libraries throughout Florida are free to download and exhibit the works in their communities.

The 500 art pieces and information about each artist and flower are exhibited as a virtual bouquet on the project website.

500 Gardens:

Students from 500 Florida schools and libraries are being encouraged to plant 500 wildflower gardens and dedicate them to one of 500 historic Florida figures selected by our team of historians.

Librarians wanting to create FLOR500 gardens are asked to:

- Review the FLOR500 list of featured honorees in their region and select a historic figure they want to honor when they plant their public wildflower garden.
- Begin to develop a class/library project or process (such as a collaborative work or a contest) where students/library visitors create an original portrait of the selected historic figure. They may also submit a 250-word essay (about the honoree and/or why the library is honoring this person), and reference materials and links to information about the honoree.
- Libraries will receive a box of seeds from Foundation co-op mid-summer. They will plant the seeds in their

garden. At the planting ceremony, participants will read the essay and display the portrait.

- Librarians will document the dedication celebration and upload photos, portraits and essays online.

500 Historic Figures

The roster of 500 includes individuals who have helped mold our state's history since March 3, 1513, when Ponce de Leon set sail from Puerto Rico on the Santa Maria de Consolación, Santiago, and San Cristóbal. The list of individuals was compiled by historians from history museums across the state under the leadership of Dr. Jeana Brunson at the Museum of Florida History.

The first FLOR500 garden was planted at the Museum of Florida History in Tallahassee on March 22, 2012 and dedicated to the indigenous people of Florida. We planted *Coreopsis lanceolata*, the official state wildflower.



The first FLOR500 Garden featured *Coreopsis lanceolata*, the official state wildflower. It was planted in front of the Museum of Florida History in Tallahassee, Florida on March 22, 2012 and dedicated to Florida's indigenous people. From left to right, Florida artist Xavier Cortada, Secretary of State Ken Detzner and Jeff Caster from DOT plant Florida wildflowers outside the R.A. Gray building. PHOTO BY GLENN BEIL/Democrat

On November 27, another garden was dedicated in Miami's Vizcaya Museum and Gardens to Juan Ponce de Leon and the Taino people of the Caribbean he left behind as he journeyed to Florida. There, at the edge of Biscayne Bay, the place he sailed by 500 years ago now has three species planted in his name:

- FLOR#458 Blue Porterweed (*Stachytarpheta jamaicensis*)
- FLOR#474 Scorpionstail (*Heliotropium angiospermum*)
- FLOR #490 Rockland Shrubverbena (*Lantana depressa*)

During the rest of 2013, I will be visiting other Florida cities to plant similar FLOR500 gardens. In March I planted a garden at a library in Naples. This month, I'll be planting another in a parochial school in Fernandina Beach and at a gallery in Gainesville. The next four gardens are slated for the fall in Pensacola, Tampa, Orlando and Stuart.

Beyond 500

The FLOR500 project marks the importance of the moment when the history of our state changed forever and gives us a glimpse of what its landscape was like 500 years ago.

These gardens are created to inspire Floridians to replicate the effort and plant gardens at home to honor the natural history of Florida and of its people. The more that participate, the stronger the project.

Indeed, all Floridians are asked to participate in the 500th anniversary by growing native wildflower gardens at home, and in the process, help reduce drought and improve biodiversity.

Each time I visit a new community to plant a garden, I invite 100 participants to transform one of my original drawings of a Florida wildflower into 100 living gardens. My drawing is cut into 100 tiled pieces; each tile comes with a packet of Florida wildflower seeds. Participants are asked to take the drawing and seeds home and plant a garden dedicated to a Floridian that is special to them — anyone who currently lives or who has lived in Florida during the past 500 years.

In the process, not only will they pay tribute to someone special in their lives, but they will learn about their environment and help improve Florida's biodiversity by growing native plants.

Upon planting the garden, they are asked to upload the dedication and their photos online at www.flor500.com.

Virtual Presence

The project does have a strong virtual presence on the web and on [facebook.com/flor500](https://www.facebook.com/flor500).

I use the Internet to help scale up and support my participatory eco-art projects. It is an efficient way to inform individuals about how they can engage in the project locally and provide a platform for them to communicate what they've created and see what others have done elsewhere.

As more people commit themselves to addressing the problem, it helps to know that they are not going at it alone. It is inspiring to know that there are others out there just as passionate about solving a particular problem and just as active in solving it.

In a time when we can feel so disconnected, large-scale projects unify us in our resolve and allow us to engage in trans-community rituals that bring us together across all sorts of divides.

New Ways of Thinking

FLOR500 is a huge undertaking. It has lots of reach.

But it isn't just about numbers and inspiration, it is also

about innovation. Having more people engaged in art-making means that they are thinking more creatively and that generates more opportunities for innovation.

These projects, in essence, serve as an invitation for people to come, experience, and act. Through their participation they can provide valuable feedback on how to make the process and project better.

But the biggest contribution comes in that participants are asked to imagine, to see things differently, and help innovate new ways of thinking about things. Indeed, these projects serve as platforms for them to create new projects of their own.

The effort furthers my long-standing commitment to eco-art projects that engage the community and expose human impact on the environment.

My hope is that by planting one garden at a time, we are planting seeds of change. Change that is needed so that when we, as a community of engaged individuals, look to the next 500 years, we can find better ways to coexist with nature. And with one another.

About the Artist

Xavier Cortada created art at the Earth Poles to generate environmental awareness at every point in between. In 2007, the artist used the moving ice sheet beneath the South Pole as an instrument to mark time; the art piece will be completed in 150,000 years. In 2008, Cortada planted a green flag at



Xavier Cortada

the North Pole to encourage reforestation in the world below (see www.nativeflags.org).

Cortada often collaborates with scientists in his art-making; Cortada used samples (and inspiration) provided by researchers in

Antarctica to create his National Science Foundation-sponsored works there. He has also worked with a population geneticist on a project exploring our ancestral journeys out of Africa 60,000 years ago, with a molecular biologist to synthesize an actual DNA strand made from a sequence randomly generated by participants visiting his museum exhibit, and with botanists in eco-art projects to reforest mangroves, native trees and wildflowers. At CERN, Cortada worked with a physicist to develop a site-specific art installation and performance piece capturing the five search strategies which the CMS experiment has used to discover a new Higgs-like particle.

Cortada serves as Artist-in-Residence at Florida International University's (FIU) College of Architecture + The Arts (CARTA).



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Editorial Content

We welcome articles on native plant species and related conservation topics, as well as high-quality botanical illustrations and photographs. Contact the editor for guidelines, deadlines and other information.

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The purpose of the Florida Native Plant Society is to conserve, preserve, and restore the native plants and native plant communities of Florida.

Official definition of native plant:

For most purposes, the phrase Florida native plant refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation. More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

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