

Arts: Visual Art

USF and TGH have something in common: Good art collections

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As the opening for the University of South Florida's new Marshall Student Center loomed, Tampa architect John Curran knew he had one last thing to take care of. To complement the voluminous building's snazzy green-and-gold terrazzo floors and sleek, contemporary furniture, the Marshall Student Center's designer needed some artwork. Something that would say "USF!" Say, a collection of pieces by current and former faculty and students -- maybe even a few that speak directly to the student experience. A collection that would elevate the space, gorgeous as it is, from a cool building to a distinctive home for the university's student body. Great idea, but how to go about realizing such a collection?

"Instead of me doing it, I realized I'd be better off with someone with a lot more knowledge and a lot more contacts," Curran says.

Enter Marilyn Mars. As an art consultant, she works with clients -- from big institutions to private households -- in building art collections they love. (Yes, *love*. Even in corporate or institutional collections, where the artworks often serve to decorate or "brand" the space, clients become fiercely attached to certain pieces. Curran, for his part, waxes poetic about a Theo Wujcik painting he wishes were even larger.)

Over the past two years, Mars -- a longtime Tampa resident who moved to Charlottesville, Va., in 2005 -- has overseen the development of two notable institutional collections in Tampa: one for the Marshall Student Center and one for Tampa General Hospital's new wing, the Bayshore Pavilion. Think of them as a last fond goodbye from a woman who, during her 20 years as a local resident, worked at the Tampa Museum of Art and organized a citywide gallery hop during the late 1980s.

For USF and TGH, Mars used her Rolodex -- along with a call to artists -- to round up many of the Bay area's most talented practitioners of fine arts. (The TGH collection includes roughly 100 pieces and was funded by a \$100,000 donation from Dick and Cornelia Corbett, while the Marshall Student Center collection numbers about 60 pieces and was paid for with student fees as part of the new building.) The results are on view in public spaces inside the two buildings, and visitors are welcome -- though for most people, a recreational visit to TGH's emergency room may not hold much appeal. The real beneficiaries, though, are the people who use the spaces. For anyone familiar with the old Marshall Center, the fact that a student now can grab a bagel from the snack bar and plop down in a comfy chair near a painting by Tampa street artist Tes One marks a radical improvement from the former space. At the Bayshore Pavilion, visitors to the women's health unit are greeted by a cheerful floral painting by Katie DeLaCruz that the hospital even uses as a graphic motif in its marketing materials for expectant moms.

In organizing the collections, Mars walked the delicate line between adhering to a theme or sentiment in line with her clients' goals and selecting challenging or unusual pieces. The TGH collection -- largely designed to soothe patients -- is heavy on photographs of Florida's natural landscapes, but also includes

gems like a woven wool piece by St. Petersburg's Laura Militzer Bryant made of vibrant, hand-dyed fiber that shifts subtly from red to violet hues. In the pediatric ward, a desire for fun, playful pieces led to the choice of former University of Central Florida professor Rebecca Sittler's large-scale photograph of a stack of donuts. (In 2006, the same image was included in the Tampa Museum of Art's *underCURRENT/overVIEW* showcase of emerging artists.)

At USF, a massive painting of a young woman by current student Penny Livingston just happens to suggest a coed walking across campus, Mars says; she chose it because Livingston's flat painting style reminded her of images by famed artist Alex Katz. Prominent local artists including Elisabeth Condon, Dolores Coe, Bruce Marsh, David McKirdy and John Gurbacs made the cut for both collections.

The artworks, each of which was subject to committee approval at its respective institution, add up to a statement about the kind of place they occupy, Mars says. The USF collection, which occasionally extends beyond professors and alumni to include artists like New York-based Keith Edmier, who has worked with Graphicstudio, paints a picture of a college community that values the arts. The TGH collection suggests an institution that cares as much about patients' comfort and emotional wellbeing as it does about their physical wellness.

Both are reflective of a trend toward recognition in the larger business community that customers (be they patients, students, etc.) place increasing value on the aesthetic component of service transactions. In a crude sense, the "sense of place" engendered by something as comparatively simple as an art collection translates into more "cents" for the institution in the form of greater client satisfaction and word of mouth.

But then, amassing such collections only seems simple when a professional like Mars is running the show.

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