

ART, NATURALLY



COMMENTARY

The red alien-like figures in *Garden Glass* look like hikers climbing up a tropical trail along a stream.

Potted plants — in real life as in this work of art, *Endangered Species* — are seated in strollers, a high chair

and a crib spread out on a lush lawn.

A wooden boat laden with brilliant glass sculptures in red, yellow and blue, *Carnival Boat*, floats on a lake surrounded by palms, ever the metaphor for South Florida.

At a time when more and more works of art are being showcased outside the confines of galleries and museums, the wonderwork of *Chihuly at Fairchild*, in its second-year run at Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden in Coral Gables — and the new sculpture garden installations of the *Art & Flow-*

ers program — stand as a tribute to the marriage of art and nature.

It's a whimsical union, at times amusing, at times touching, and always colorful. But as in many a partnership, behind the facade of tranquility there is a subtext, the power struggle of cohabitation.

Art versus nature: the battle of two titans.

In texts accompanying his exhibit, Seattle-based artist Dale Chihuly says he wants his work "to appear like it came from nature."

It doesn't, but that's not a bad thing. Chihuly's sculptures achieve the feat



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*TURN TO FAIRCHILD, 3M



PHOTOS BY FABIOLA SANTIAGO/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

TREATS AT FAIRCHILD: From left, petticoat palm, a native of Cuba, shows off cascading fronds; Dale Chihuly's *Citron Green and Red Tower*, is a crowd pleaser at the visitors' center; and *River Bowl*, a 14-foot cedar sculpture by New York artist Ursula von Rydingsvard, reaches upward. Carved into a mournful shape, the work represents rain forest destruction.

Art vs. nature — a colorful tableau in tropical garden

*FAIRCHILD, FROM 1M

of complementing nature, of dressing it up, and that's good enough.

You see, Mother Nature is a splendid competitor. If the expectation is for the art to match its beauty — or, outdo it — then, the artist is condemned to failure.

Take the *Petticoat Palm*, a native of Cuba.

On this Sunday, when I am touring the art exhibits and photographing Chihuly's work and that of other sculptors, the palm calls out to me with her strikingly tall presence and plump trunk. Her cascading fronds are drying out, but she looks gracious and grand in her decay, a lot like Havana. There's a lot of sculpture in this palm and plenty of metaphor in a guide's explanation that "Cuban petticoat palms don't drop their fronds."

Across the lake from the petticoat, Chihuly's solidly yellow *Towers* spirals high into the sky and stands in contrast. I photograph its symmetry and notice that the palm trees surrounding it — *el palmar* that has inspired so many a Caribbean poet — complete the piece's air of grandeur. Every monarch needs his court.

And so it is, as I wind my way

through this 83-acre haven where, Chihuly or no Chihuly, you experience grace.

South Florida is in no way unique in this experience of creating works of art in the dramatic stage of its flora. In her recently published *Destination Art* (University of California Press, \$39.95), author Amy Dempsey chronicles the virtues of 200 of the most important modern and contemporary art sites around the world.

Among them: The "magical wonderland" *Giardino dei Tarocchi* (Tarot Garden) Franco-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle created on top of a quarry hill in Tuscany. The site-specific works, a tribute to contemporary art and architecture, by various artists at Kielder Water and Forest Park in England. Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* in the Great Basin Desert in Utah.

"A powerful work of art can take you on a journey," says Dempsey, an arts writer who worked for the Tate Modern Museum in London. "It can take you to another dimension and provide insight into another world, time, place or way of thinking."

At Fairchild, billed as one of the world's premier tropical botanic gardens, nature contributes to the

installation the unmatched beauty of spontaneity — a dry palm frond in an otherwise delightful show of purple by *Cobalt Herons* reminds us of our perpetual state of aging.

A branch that imposes itself on the charming *Garden Glass* means to show who's boss here, who owns the turf — the tropical forest habitat, of course.

The ice-like sculptures, *Blue Crystals*, leave one cold, though the *Walla Walla*, onion-like sculptures in blue, green and yellow add charm to Glade Lake, the most photographed lake at Fairchild.

Of the man-made art, the most impressive sculpture in the Fairchild exhibition is the massive *River Bowl* by New York artist Ursula von Rydingsvard, who was born in Germany and spent her early childhood in refugee camps until she could come to the United States with her parents and six siblings.

The 14-foot-tall cedar sculpture, carved into a mournful shape, represents the destruction of the rain forest, "a place of remote grandeur."

Likewise in their eloquence are the plants in baby gear, by naturalist and installation artist Mark Dion titled *Endangered Species Babies on Prams & Strollers*, *Endangered Spe-*

cies in Play Pens, *Endangered Species in High Chairs*.

Dion, who conducted research at Fairchild for this installation, is known for working on projects that illustrate "how humans have understood and misunderstood the natural world."

Their installations are part of Fairchild's *Art & Flowers* annual exhibition, now in its fourth year. Dion's work stands with von Rydingsvard as the most relevant to Fairchild's mission to engage in research, conservation and education.

Chihuly's gorgeous glass sculptures are like makeup on a beautiful woman, pretty to look at but only a skin-deep show.

As if you had any doubts, the trek around the park brings you to a spot where the *Rainbow Eucalyptus*, native to Australia (although this tree has been imported from New Guinea), stands tall.

The exquisite multihued display of color on its bark makes it seem as if an artist has unleashed her palate on this tree trunk. But this is all nature's work.

The rainbow of color is formed when the bark slowly peels off, layer by layer, and the bright green surface inside the tree turns blue,

then purple, and as it is exposed to air, brick red.

The eucalyptus renders the final edict: There is no greater work of art than nature itself.

Fabiola Santiago is *The Miami Herald's* visual arts writer.

IF YOU GO

What: *Chihuly at Fairchild and Art & Flowers*

Where: Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden, 10901 Old Cutler Rd., Coral Gables

When: 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily through May 31; Tropical Chihuly Nights 6 to 9 p.m. Thursdays; illuminated Chihuly show and jazz concert by New World School of the Arts Jazz Ensemble on Feb. 14, Valentine's Day, from 5:30 p.m.

Cost: \$20 adults, \$15 seniors, \$10 children 6-17, free for members and children under 5; Valentine's Day night show for non-members is \$60, \$45 for members, \$15 children.

Info: www.fairchildgarden.org or 305-667-1651