



Xavier Cortada, "Flower Force" hand painted ceramic and tile, 8' x 4' x 4'; 2021, photo by Adam Roberti.



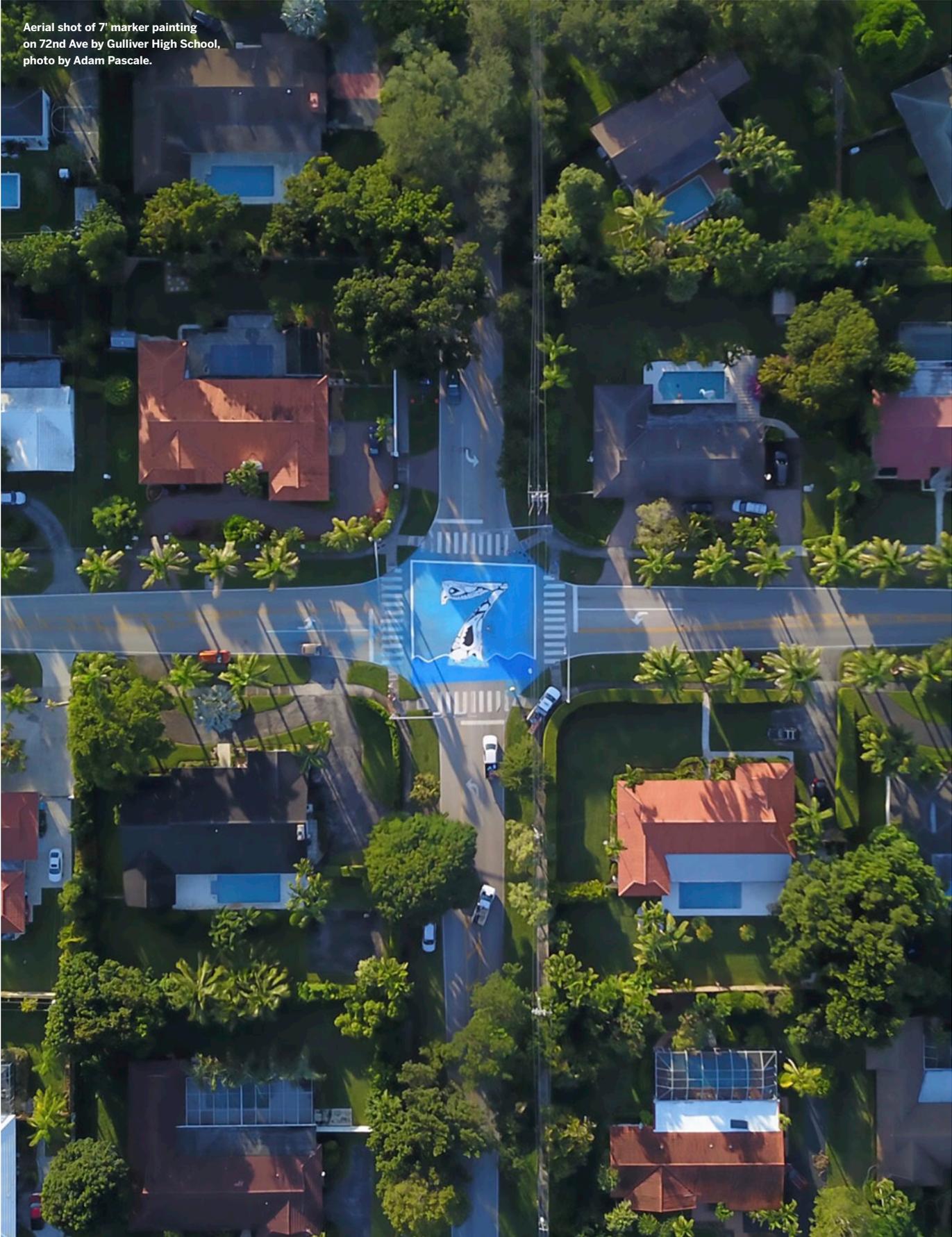
WHEN IT COMES TO CLIMATE, ARE CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS BREAKING GROUND OR LOSING GROUND?

by Xavier Cortada

Humanity currently faces an existential crisis that is born from the decisions of an infinitesimally small percentage of the global population. As fossil fuel executives and many political leaders continue to line their pockets and consolidate their power, climate change is ravaging the world with floods, droughts, storms, and wildfires. It is no coincidence that the people most affected by these disasters are disproportionately Black, Indigenous, People of Color, living in the Global South, who have historically contributed the least to the destabilization of our climate—injustice of the greatest magnitude.

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Aerial shot of 7' marker painting on 72nd Ave by Gulliver High School, photo by Adam Pascale.





Miami Senior High School students and their Underwater Markers, photo by Adam Roberti.

Equitably addressing the climate crisis and rapidly transitioning to renewable energy will not only require a groundswell of support for significant climate legislation, but also the inclusion of those whose interests have not been adequately represented in decision-making processes.

With powerful opposition to the policies that would accelerate this global shift, how can we cultivate a broad base of people who champion climate justice and help build the political will necessary for real, systemic change? The climate crisis isn't someone else's problem to solve. It impacts every individual, young and old, and even those not yet born. It impacts every community, from Wall Street to Main Street. It impacts every state, rural and urban, coastal and inland. It impacts every nation, every continent, every ocean, every ecosystem.

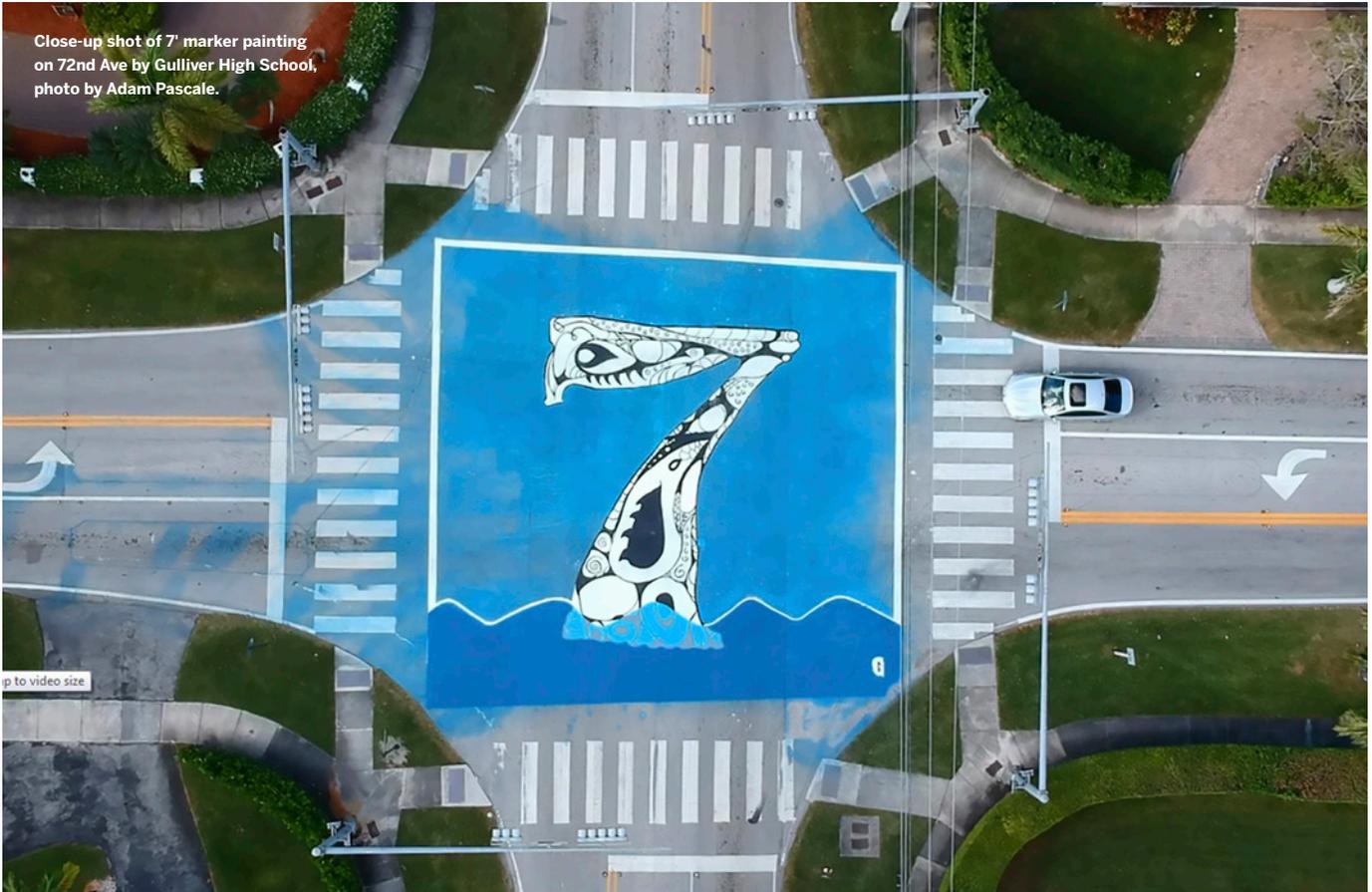
It impacts everything.

What role do the arts have in engaging society around the greatest issue of our time? How can artists and administrators meaningfully and strategically contribute to climate change awareness, mitigation, and adaptation efforts?

As an artist who has created climate art at both of the Earth's poles, collaborated with scientists to create socially engaged art projects that have mobilized communities around environmental issues, and been appointed as the inaugural artist-in-residence for one of the most climate-vulnerable places of the United States, Miami-Dade County, I see the climate crisis as a problem that the cultural community is uniquely equipped to help solve. Art has the power to break down barriers, bridge divides, and show us new ways of seeing so we can be

moved into action. In a world that is both polarized and paralyzed, art can be harnessed as a democratizing agent that helps individuals relate to one another, connect on issues they care about, build new coalitions, and work toward a more just future.

Cultural leaders have a unique responsibility and opportunity to understand the power they wield in transforming society. With dire projections of sea level rise, food and water shortages, and forced migrations due to climate disasters, our challenge is to lead by strategically facilitating creative ideas, modeling proactive behaviors, and providing individuals with a sense of agency in the problem-solving. We must accept the importance of this moment in human history so that we aren't simply showcasing and critiquing today's culture, but



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intentionally molding and shaping culture through time, thereby creating an ethos committed to saving the planet.

Funders, artistic and program directors, curators, collectors, and critics all have an inherent influence on the ideas and works that are produced as they determine the kind of art that is validated, elevated, and celebrated. Just as Walmart has a grip on the supply chain and influences suppliers to build products with particular specifications or standards, curators and producers call attention to certain concepts and themes that then guide the focus of many artists. Topics surrounding social and racial equity are extremely relevant today. What if environmental issues were given the same attention and platform? What if artistic practices centered around climate change were uplifted to promote the accompanying discourse?

What if exhibitions were created to make a tangible difference in the community where they're located rather than to please an art critic?

A cultural institution can have transformative effects that have nothing to do with ticket sales or the kind of metrics that directors or board members typically want. Cultural, executive, and programmatic leaders can push outside their comfort zone to make their institution more relevant to the local cultural ecosystem, and one that moves the needle. By approaching the work like a choreographer, for example, these leaders could bring in the dancers they know from government, the private sector, and education to create a dance that completely alters the way a community addresses the climate crisis. There needs to be a willingness to take risks and occasionally fail in



pursuit of these ambitious endeavors. Given the circumstances, this is no time to play it safe.

At an institutional level, it is essential to walk the walk before you talk the talk to maintain credibility and trust within the community. In some circumstances it may be easier to move a facility in a sustainable direction rather than using it to program a sustainability exhibit. Organizations can look at ways of reducing energy consumption, implementing waste diversion programs, eliminating single-use plastics, and incentivizing eco-friendly modes of transportation such as electric vehicles and public transit. Exploring these options and then proudly displaying these commitments shines a light on the direction that the institution is moving in, models a respect for the environment, and often coincides with long-term cost-saving measures.

Importantly, it prepares organizations for the programming that will inevitably come from cultural producers. Just as technology has revolutionized everything we do, climate will be embedded into every decision we make as it continues to disrupt every facet of life as we know it. Climate will become central to the focus of cultural producers. The question is only whether they begin to do so soon enough to lessen the harm to come tomorrow.

Cultural institutions hold vast amounts of power that come from the faith and trust of their audiences. Institutions can help shape and marshal their visitors to confront our climate threats. In turn, these audiences can hold institutions accountable for their actions or inaction.

That power extends across all sectors of society, particularly through board

membership. By modeling behaviors and best practices that board members can take back to their own corporations, there is a domino effect of green initiatives. In this way, institutions can help catalyze a cultural shift that sees public art committees commission carbon-neutral sculptures or performing arts organizations fund productions that raise awareness about rising seas.

As chair of the Miami-Dade County Cultural Affairs Council, I launched the Green Task Force, and we created the Arts Resilient 305 initiative to encourage local cultural organizations to adopt more sustainable practices and develop programs that addressed resiliency. We collaborated with the county's Office of Resilience to develop a set of recommendations for Miami-Dade's 1,000+ nonprofit cultural organizations and created a website that provides

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9' marker painting at 67th Ave by Westminster High School, photo by Adam Pascale.



information and resources for artists and arts organizations involved in integrating and promoting sustainability. The Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs also provides commissions for artists to create temporary public art works or performance art works that raise awareness about climate change and highlight local advocacy opportunities for artists and organizations alike.

Through my time with the Cultural Affairs Council and in my own practice, I've found that people are most likely to engage with issues such as climate change if they are given a sense of agency. The feeling that they can help solve a problem or effectuate change is integral to inspiring their curiosity and motivating them to get involved.

In 2018, I worked with the Village of Pinecrest to develop a socially engaged art project that would raise awareness about sea level rise and empower residents into action. We called it the "Underwater Homeowners Association." Launched during Art Basel, participants in the "Underwater HOA" displayed their property elevations across the community. Using an app, residents discovered their property's elevation above sea level and then installed an "Underwater Marker" (a yard sign depicting their house's elevation) in their front yard. In addition to the personalized signs, I partnered with the Village of Pinecrest and local public high schools to paint elevation markers on four major intersections along Pinecrest's Killian Drive. These community-driven art installations garnered international media attention, but more importantly, led to monthly meetings where residents could come together, learn from relevant scientists and experts, and ultimately begin planning for a future impacted by rising seas.

In 2021, I used a public art commission from the Village of Palmetto Bay to blur the lines between private and public

art and engage the community in a large-scale ecological restoration project. Using the public art piece as the heart of the effort, I gave away wildflowers and ceramic wildflower sculptures to the first 200 Palmetto Bay families who agreed to plant the flowers in their yard and install the ceramic sculpture outside their home, thereby joining the "Flower Force." Through this process, a community-wide public art installation of wildflower sculptures and gardens radiated from the flower sphere at the Palmetto Bay traffic circle and extended throughout the Village. By activating the central sculpture with community members, discussions were generated about saving pollinators, transforming lawns into gardens that conserve water, decreasing the use of pesticides, and protecting ecosystems across South Florida.

Whether someone is participating in a socially engaged art project, watching a play, or looking at a painting, they are typically open and receptive to the artistic experience. It is a space that is generally disarming, contemplative, and allows for a shift in perspective. This is a tool that we know how to use. People have used art throughout history to catalyze responses to injustice, such as during the civil rights movement, but for our current environmental crisis, art is underutilized. As thinkers, innovators, and leaders of the cultural community during these uncertain times, we must ask ourselves—are we breaking ground or losing ground? ^A



XAVIER CORTADA (he/him) is an artist, University of Miami professor of practice, and the inaugural artist-in-residence for Miami-Dade County. [Read more.](#)