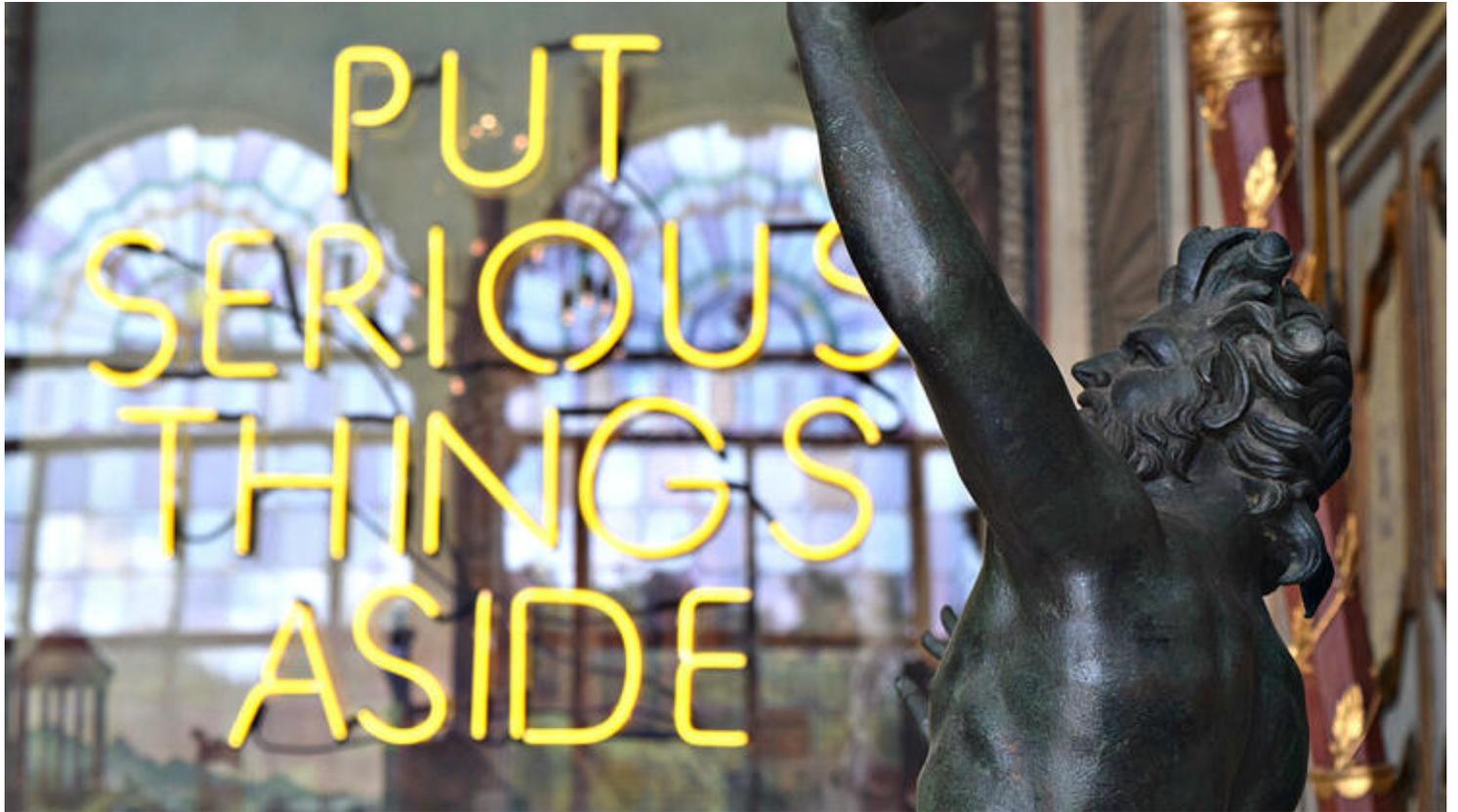


# Artists explore hidden history of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens



By **Phillip Valys** · Contact Reporter

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**T**hey sound like characters from "Downton Abbey," Miami edition.

There's the laundress, an old woman missing most of her teeth, often spotted inside the telephone room at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens in Coconut Grove. The well-mannered head butler dwells in Vizcaya's living room, sporting a black uniform. The housekeeper, dignified in her yellow tunic, can't be bothered to touch a mop or broom, but always ensures the laundress (her BFF) is given enough soap. She's also in charge of the virginity of the younger maids. She bars one 19-year-old maid from dating the chauffeur, who has a drinking problem.

Miami photographer David Rohn portrays these and other characters in 15 portraits scattered throughout the ornate rooms of Villa Vizcaya, the Italian Renaissance-style abode built 100 years ago by millionaire industrialist James Deering.

"I would call it, 'Tales of Vizcaya,'" says Rohn, who has also invented dramatic narratives for the motley of well-postured servants who might have served Deering a century ago.

With thick eyebrows and a wide, expressive face smeared in women's makeup, Rohn inhabits each character in the portraits, which decorate Vizcaya's mantelpieces and entrance-hall tables in marble and antique wood frames. The photos celebrate the lives of Vizcaya's lower class as part of the museum's new exhibit, "Lost Spaces and Stories of Vizcaya," a collection of seven installations that probe long-forgotten histories of the estate, which marks its centennial this year.

"There are almost no records of the wait staff [at the museum], which should tell you how much they were taken for granted, in the same way you take your car mechanic for granted," Rohn says. "The people in those jobs, I felt, were just invisible. Visitors will identify more with the cooks and cleaners of the world than the 1 percenters."

Vizcaya curator Gina Wouters tapped Rohn and other South Florida artists to build the installations, which are integrated into the house's original coral stone and concrete architecture. She says the artworks, installed this month, shine new light on Vizcaya's oldest features.

Wouters says the 100-year-old empty moat framing the museum is one of Vizcaya's more enduring mysteries, and "never discussed" on guided tours around the lush property. The moat, which is 10 feet deep, was dug into the local coral stone, and was too porous to contain any water. Deering later ordered the moat be filled with cacti to deter trespassers, Wouters says.

"Some of our visitors thought it was a natural crevice, but it was something that's fabricated. It's manmade," Wouters says. "We've never tackled this part of Vizcaya's history before."

For his installation, artist Juraj Kojis recorded audio from Vizcaya's fountains, swimming pool and shoreline. Dripping water can be heard from speakers installed in the moat, located under Vizcaya's ticket booth. "The moat was an example of a failure to adapt a European tradition to the Miami setting," reads a note posted on a sign near the ticket booth.

Duane Brant, meanwhile, laid white strips of reflective fabric along the bottom of the moat. Before Deering dug the trench, Wouters says, the same area was part of Brickell Avenue, before he diverted the road to South Miami Avenue.

Lucinda Linderman, meanwhile, has woven a series of felt topographical maps depicting Miami in the 1920s, present day and 50 years from now. Linderman covered the edge of the coastlines in blue fabric — Vizcaya is mostly underwater in the future — as a commentary on sea-level rise. The maps take advantage of Vizcaya's wooden map racks, anchored into the wall along the building's north arcade.

The seven installations are technically the first phase of the exhibit, Wouters says. The second phase, set to debut in December to coincide with Vizcaya's centennial birthday, will have installations from Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova, who will pay tribute to Vizcaya's casba, or destroyed garden pavilion; collaborators Mira

Lehr and Yahr Travieso, who will "personify" Vizcaya as Dido, the Roman queen of Carthage; and Kerry Phillips, who will install found furniture on the villa's winding marble staircase.

*"Lost Spaces and Stories of Vizcaya" is on view through May 2017 at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, 3251 S. Miami Ave., in Coconut Grove. Hours are 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday and Wednesday-Sunday. Admission costs \$6-\$18. Call 305-250-9133 or go to [Vizcaya.org](http://Vizcaya.org).*

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