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## ITTY-BITTY CREATIONS

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## MINI EXHIBIT

The John Erickson Museum of Art is just like a regular museum, only smaller. A lot smaller.



Artist John Kieltyka made this mini art gallery for The John Erickson Museum of Art. Each photo is about the size of a postage stamp. ANDREW WEST/THE NEWS-PRESS

By Charles Runnells  
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Give Sean Miller five minutes, and he can open a museum almost anywhere.

He can even do it in two minutes, if necessary.

It's easy, of course, when your entire museum can fit in



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The John  
Erickson

Museum of Art

the trunk of a car. Miller simply borrows a room in someone else's building — and not nec-

essarily with the owner's permission — sets up a few of his shoebox-sized art galleries, takes some photos, packs everything up and quickly heads for the exit.

There you go: Another museum opening for the books.

Miller's biggest challenge is staying ahead of the security

guards. But by the time the guards catch on, it's usually too late. The John Erickson Museum of Art has already opened and closed for the day.

"My museum is 'location-variable,'" Miller says with a mischievous smile. "It can go to any location."

"It has a two-minute opening, and that opening can happen really quickly, anywhere."

Now Miller's unique mini museum has come to the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in south Fort Myers. But don't worry, art lovers: This time, the

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museum stays open longer than just a minute or two. It'll be there until July 25.

Rauschenberg Gallery organized the 10-year retrospective for the John Erickson Museum of Art (or "JEMA"), which they gave the purposely enigmatic title "ELEVEN." The exhibit actually closes on JEMA's 11th anniversary.

After that, Miller will pack up the museum's miniature galleries for a tour that starts at Gainesville's Harn Museum.

The exhibit features more than 25 diorama-like art galleries made from polished basswood, each with tiny painted walls and a tiny gallery door — presumably for tiny imaginary art lovers to enter the room.

What goes on those walls depends entirely on the artist. Some galleries feature miniature paintings mounted and framed on the walls, just like you'd find in any other gallery in the world. Others go way beyond what you'd expect.

Yoko Ono went with her usual pacifist themes and emblazoned one gallery wall with the motto "IMAGINE PEACE." Belfast's Brendan Jamison plopped an igloo-like replica of Berlin's famous Reichstag Building dome — made entirely of sugar cubes — in the middle of his gallery's floor. And New York artist Ben Patterson hung tiny, hand-tinted images demonstrating a woman putting on a sari for a piece called "Bollywood Love: Object of Desire."

Other artists are even more out there and inventive.

Well-known Tampa artist Gregory Green continues his ongoing concept of "The New Free State of Caroline" —



Texas art duo The Art Guys built this ship-in-a-bottle-inspired mini gallery for The John Erickson Museum of Art exhibit at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Edison State College. ANDREW WEST/THE NEWS-PRESS

a made-up country with its own flag and everything — by turning his gallery into the country's "consulate general's office." One wall is painted yellow with Caroline's blue sun logo. Postage-stamp sized paintings hang on another wall. And tiny chairs and potted plants circle an imposing table (relatively speaking) loaded with tiny packages.

Miller, himself, went high-concept by collecting dust from museums all over the world, rolling them into a giant ball of dust and dropping it in the middle of a gallery shaped like a dustpan — included.

Rauschenberg Gallery director Jade Dellenger loves how JEMA challenges people's expectations. Yes, it is a museum. And, yes, each gallery is only 5½ inches tall.

"On some level, it's about institutional critique," Dellenger says. "It's a playful institution-

al critique."

Miller definitely seems to be having fun with the concept. The University of Florida art professor has set up his museum in places all over the world, including unauthorized openings at Miami's Art Basel art show; Micanopy City Cemetery in Micanopy; and a COSTCO store in Seattle. Plus he's overseen official openings at (full-sized) museums and galleries in Finland, Ireland, Barcelona and cities throughout the United States.

Miller loves the odd looks he gets from people when they show up for JEMA openings. Especially if the opening takes place inside another museum. You can see the look of puzzlement on their faces: Wait, it's a museum INSIDE a museum?

"I think it's institutional confusion that happens," Miller says. "You're wondering, 'What is this place?'"

Miller, of course, plays with that confusion and sometimes even sends out press releases and waits to see who shows up. The releases often leave out some crucial details. "We don't mention the scale" Miller says and grins.

Despite the obvious fun he's having with the idea, Miller insists JEMA is the real deal. It's not a joke or a gimmick.

"Sometimes people say to me, 'You know, it's like a museum almost,'" Miller says. "But you have to understand: It IS a museum."

JEMA has walls and floors and artwork. It has publicized hours (even if they're only from, say, 1 p.m. to 1:02 p.m.). Miller keeps count of visitors with a handheld click counter. And important dignitaries occasionally visit the place (Miller once gave Miss Finland a personal tour).

There are even security guards — although Miller may just be joking

about that one.

"They'll ask you to please get off museum property," he says.

Miller named the museum after his great grandfather, a watchmaker and an engraver who worked in a shop that was torn down to make room for the Seattle Museum of Art. Miller worked at the museum in almost the exact spot as that long-gone shop.

So when it came time for JEMA's debut in 2003, Miller flew from Gainesville to Seattle to set up an unsanctioned exhibit in the Seattle

Museum of Art's lobby. He and his friends smuggled in a mini gallery by artist Jesse Miller and displayed it atop its aluminum carrying case.

"So I just walked in and did our two-minute opening," Miller says. "We invited a few friends and took a few pictures. Then we closed the case and left."

"That time, I didn't get into any trouble."

Jack Massing — half of the Texas art duo The Art Guys — loves the tongue-in-cheek concept behind JEMA. He was definitely going for that same playful spirit in The Art Guys' piece for the Rauschenberg Gallery exhibit: An empty mini gallery wedged inside in a three-gallon water bottle with a cork stopper. It's like a ship in a bottle, complete with Miller's return addresses on the bottom.

After the exhibit, Massing plans to set the bottle loose in a nearby body of water and see if

## IF YOU GO

» **What:** A 10-year retrospective for The John Erickson Museum of Art (JEMA)

» **When:** Now through July 25

» **Where:** Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Edison State College, Building L, 8099 College Parkway, south Fort Myers

» **Gallery hours:** 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday, 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday.

» **Info:** 489-9313 or rauschenberggallery.com

anybody finds it and returns it to its sender.

"I was thinking about Florida and how things wash up on the beach," Massing says. "So the idea of a message in a bottle came up."

Not everyone gets the humor behind the gallery in a bottle or behind Miller's mini-museum concept. Take Massing's wife, for example.

"My wife asked, 'Why is this funny?'" Massing says. "And I said, 'Honey, it's just funny. It's a little museum in a bottle.'"

At least Miller's wife gets it. Bethany Taylor — also an artist in the exhibit and an art professor at The University of Florida — loves the museum's "out of the box" thinking.

"Most people go to a museum and visit the exhibit," Taylor says. "But I like the idea that the exhibit goes out into the world and visits you."

Sure, Miller could go the usual route and stage full-sized exhibits in one of those cube-shaped art galleries with white walls and track lighting. But where's the fun in that?

"That, to me, is a little boring," Miller says. "I like doing it this way."

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