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SoFla Artist's First-Ever Public Show Anchors NSU Art Museum's Fall Slate

Cici McMonigle's first-ever public presentation of her art is an extraordinary achievement for a mostly self-taught artist who is only 23 years old.

📅 Nov 25, 2024 / 👤 DOUG MARKOWITZ, BAJA / 👍



The first solo museum exhibition by Miami Artist Cici McMonigle, "Creatures for the Divine," is at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale through March 9, 2025. (Photo courtesy of William Benshimol)



Stepping into Cici McMonigle's studio at Bakehouse Arts Complex in Miami's Wynwood area, you might feel like you've entered a magical menagerie. There are alligators and snakebirds, dogs and big cats, and mythological creatures. Some are painted in elegant, Asiatic patterns. Others float in dreamlike suspension. And a few wear flame-print Converse shoes.

"They stopped making the flame shoes, I think it was in like 2017 or something" she says of the motif. "I paint them because I want to manifest them."

McMonigle's animal paintings form the backbone of "Creatures for the Divine," her show at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale. They come from a unique set of inspirations, rooted in the Chinese-American artist's mixed heritage. Chinese and American cultural references vie for the viewer's attention in equal measure, but the overall effect of the show is to create a whimsical, mythical world.

"I want it to be fantastical. I want it to be fun. I want it to be as if you're stepping into another world full of these creatures that almost seem as if they're coming out of a real story."

Mostly self-taught as an artist, McMonigle is quick to dispel the idea that her work is a statement on her identity – she says her process is subconscious, and that the various elements in her work (the flaming sneakers, for instance) are the result of incorporating likes and interests, things she encounters in daily life and in media from both cultures. Chinese cultural references did creep into the show as a result of her informal research, however.

"I don't sketch or plan any of my work. I like the idea that art is subconsciously what you want to make, so I just kind of go into it doing whatever I feel in the moment," she says. "I did make a lot of tigers for this show, which I haven't done before. I was reading into feng shui, and where you place artwork in the house. And I was looking into the meanings of these animals. And tigers are super symbolic in China, you know, very strong and powerful, and courageous. There's paintings where the tiger is coming down, and in feng shui you're supposed to hang this in front of your front door to ward off evil. And then if a tiger is going up, that's supposed to keep luck in the house. I just thought it was interesting."

Born in 2001 in Tianjin, a satellite city of Beijing that doubles as the 11th most populous city on Earth, McMonigle moved to Lakeland, Florida with her family in her teens. She says she's never felt totally at home in either country, however.



Cici McMonigle, "Sun Eater," 2024. (Photo courtesy of Lauren Bouza)



Cici McMonigle, "Two Cheetas," 2024. (Photo courtesy of Lauren Bouza)

"It was nice living there (in China), but I did go through this huge cultural identity crisis," she recalls. "All my family's there, all my friends are Chinese, I speak the language. But I never felt like I belonged there because I look different. People would take pictures of me on the street, or ask to take photos of me. And it still happens when I go home."

After a brief stint at Parsons School of Design and a period of showing art in Lakeland, she moved to Miami to engage with the city's vibrant art scene.

She's had quick success – the show doubles as McMonigle's first-ever public presentation of her art, which is an extraordinary achievement for a mostly self-taught artist at only 23 years old. Yet for NSU Art Museum's director and chief curator Bonnie Clearwater, age ain't nothing but a number – at least where artistic talent is concerned.

"I never held anything against a 23-year-old," she says. "Frank Stella and Helen Frankenthaler each made their major statements at 23. So age doesn't really have anything to do with it. She is really interesting, the way she draws from both her Chinese and American heritage and mythology."



Jacqueline de Jong, "Tournevicieux cosmonautique (les âmes les plus confuses se retrouvent un matin conditionnés par un peu de pesanteur), Cosmonautical Vicious Circle (The Most Confused Souls Find Themselevs One Morning Conditioned by a Little Graviity), 1966. (Image courtesy of the artist). De Jong's works is at NSU Art Museum through Sunday, May 4, 2025..

Under Clearwater's stewardship NSU Art Museum has become a crucial identifier for South Florida's early and emerging artists. They've given solo shows to the likes of Thomas Bils, Jared McGriff, and Kathia St. Hilaire; last year's presentation "Future Past Perfect" featured a selection of up-and-coming locals, including Joel Gaitan, Susan Kim Alvarez, and Alejandro Piñeiro Bello. According to Clearwater, seeing a photo of McMonigle's work was enough to entice her.

"Very often I make the decision before I even meet the artist. I had seen work with her actually online, and I made a studio visit and was very impressed by her," says Clearwater.

"She's very sure of herself, very confident about what she's doing. So she has the maturity of an (older) artist. I've never had to wait for someone else to say that someone is good or worth showing, and I felt she was ready for an exhibition at the museum."

The show is just one facet of the museum's fall/winter slate. They've already opened a show on famed photographer Joel Meyerowitz, based on a large donation of the artist's work. Meyerowitz will discuss his exhibition "Temporal Aspects" and the acquisition in a [talk at the museum at 3:30 p.m. on Sunday, Dec. 1.](#)



Along with “Creatures for the Divine,” two more shows opened on Sunday, Nov. 17. “Jacqueline de Jong: Vicious Circles,” which is on display through Sunday, May 4, 2025, is the late Dutch artist’s first U.S. solo museum show, detailing her flirtations with the CoBrA group and the Situationist International in the mid-20th century. Meanwhile, “IT INCLUDES EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE, ALWAYS” is a duo presentation for Rose B. Simpson and Vanessa German through Sunday, April 13, 2025. The two artists, the former an indigenous ceramic artist working in the Tewa tribal tradition, the latter a self-taught, LGBTQIA+ artist and activist, are longtime friends with practices that are distinct, yet complementary.

Notably, all three presentations feature female-identifying artists. But for Clearwater, the key element that links the shows is the idea of camaraderie between artists, in history and here and now in South Florida.

“It shows how important it is, this circle of artists that are deeply involved with each other, even if the works don’t look the same, how important these relationships are.”

IF YOU GO

WHAT : “Cici McMonigle: Creatures for the Divine”

WHERE: NSU Art Museum, 1 E. Las Olas Blvd, Fort Lauderdale

WHEN: Through Sunday, March 9; Noon to 5 p.m. Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday, closed Monday.

TICKETS: \$16 for adults, \$10 for seniors, \$8 for military, \$5 for students 13 and up with ID, free for NSU students, faculty and staff, Broward College students, and children 12 and under.

INFORMATION: : (954) 525-5500 and nsuartmuseum.org.