

## THE ARTS | 'YUCEF MERHI: OPEN'

# Digital artist's solo show is a conversation about the power of technology

BY MICHELLE F. SOLOMON  
ArtburstMiami.com

With its new exhibit, "Yucef Merhi: Open," The Bonnier Gallery invites visitors to open their eyes, hearts and minds to digital art — to feel its energy and go beyond the buzz.

"There has been a lot of buzz and conversation about digital art as of late

because of NFTs," says gallery co-owner Grant Bonnier, referring to nonfungible tokens — those digital assets (from

music clips to photos to artwork) that exist only in cyberspace and are bought and sold using cryptocurrency. "For a lot of people who are new to the art world, they think that because of NFTs, digital art is something new and it's not."

They may also see it as "something that is cold and sterile," says Bonnier. "With Yucef's work, it's very much not."

The Venezuelan-born, Miami-based Merhi transforms what could be considered vapid technological components and gives them life. The exhibit features 15 pieces from the artist, poet and computer programmer.

"Cathexis, it's the art of instilling energy into an object, and that's what Yucef does," Bonnier explains, adding that much of

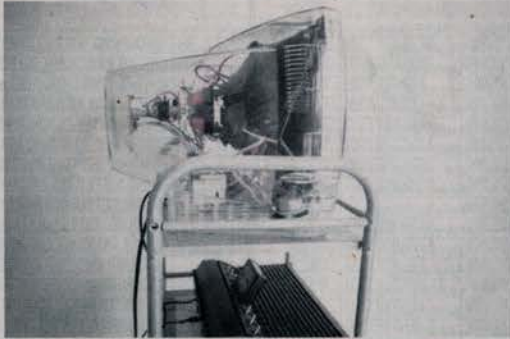


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The artist uses TV sets with clear casings in some of his works, including in "Atari Poetry VI" (2006). This style of television was originally used in prisons.

what's included in "Open" is work that is also steeped in poetry. He says The Bonnier Gallery, which he opened in November 2018 with his wife Christina in Allapattah, has a "particular interest in works that find themselves at the intersection of visual art and language."

"Open" presents a mix of ideas, a "critical midpoint" of Merhi's career, according to Bonnier. Some works show Merhi's very early explorations, while others show the evolution and metamorphosis of the 44-year-old's decades-long practice.

When Merhi received an Atari console as a child, he turned it into a programmable computer. That was the beginning.

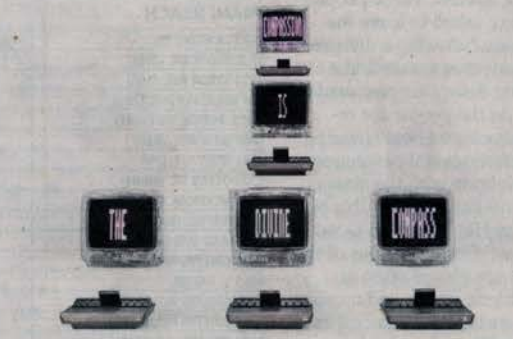
"When I was a kid, I felt like I could communicate with Atari machines," Merhi says. "Electronic toys were the way I was able to build my reality."

"Compassion," the largest piece in the exhibit and one of the newest, features five television sets and five Atari 2600 game consoles and cartridges, which Merhi programmed to display words. Set up on a rising staircase, the top TV shows the word, "Compassion," with the TVs on the next steps completing the statement: "Compassion is the divine compass."

Merhi says he spent all of 2020 building the work. The intensity of creating "Compassion" came from coding the Atari cartridges. "They take several months each to build, and there were five of them," Merhi says.

The 13-inch RCA television sets had been made to be used in prisons: They have clear back panels meant to ensure prisoners cannot tamper with the electronics.

"I also spent time meditating in front of them,



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Yucef Merhi's "Compassion" is part of a new exhibit at The Bonnier Gallery.

because I wanted to put energy into the objects and to make peace with the people who had these TVs," Merhi says. "I also wanted to cleanse the past out of them and especially my own darkness, my own shadows."

The idea was to reclaim the televisions with positive meaning, according to Merhi.

"Compassion" is the grand finale and is perhaps the most powerful piece in the exhibit. It also incorporates the early Atari work that gained Merhi acclaim. Merhi has coined a word for the use of the Atari systems and the TVs: retro-cycling.

This idea is what grabbed the interest of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which selected Merhi for a fellowship as part of its MIT Open Documentary Lab. For the fellowship, he'll investigate how to reduce electronic waste that comes

from obsolete technologies — such as Atari consoles, cassette and CD players, TVs and slide projectors — and which have filled dumps for decades.

Another grand work in the "Open" exhibition at The Bonnier is "The Poetic Clock 2.0" (2000), a digital time machine that displays three lines of poetry. Merhi created software so that, at different times, each line will change. The top sentence changes every hour, the second verse shifts every minute, and the third every second. The digital artist here is displaying language through the movement of time with a new poem constantly being generated. The clock generates 86,400 different poems every 24 hours.

Political commentary is also prevalent in much of his art. In "Artificial Stupidity" (2019), for example, what looks like a friendly video arcade game, upon closer inspection, features

Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro chasing flags. As the user moves the Maduro character — the computer game's equivalent to Pac-Man — the end game is to have him eat the flag and watch it be expelled into a poop emoji, or "transformed into digital excrement," Merhi says, "alluding to the systematic destruction of the country."

Merhi recently had two pieces on display at Oolite Arts as part of its group exhibition, "Where there is power." His work, "Maximum Security" (1998-2004), "consists of hacked emails from Venezuela's previous leader, Hugo Chávez, while 'No Fly Security' (2018-2019) is composed of documents and emails that includes the nonpublic roster of individuals prohibited from flying in and out of the United States on suspicion of terrorist ties.

## IF YOU GO

**What:** "Yucef Merhi: Open"

**When:** 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through Nov. 20.

**Where:** The Bonnier Gallery, 3408 NW Seventh Ave., Miami

**Cost:** Free

**Safety protocols:** Masks should be worn; appointments encouraged. Information: 305-960-7850; thebonniergallery.com

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