Artist Jedd Novatt posed for a portrait by Tropic photographer Robin Hill in front of his newly installed sculpture, Chaos SAS in the sculpture garden at the new Perez Art Museum Miami. Chaos SAS and Chaos Bizkaia are two new works, one in bronze, the other in stainless steel, to be placed in the museum’s outdoor collections.

EACH YEAR ART BASEL’S appearance in Miami Beach gets bigger and more frenetic. Glossy magazines fall over each other to present people pages filled with boldfaced names of who was seen where and who bought what. But as this celebration comes once more, it might be time to focus less on which Banksy brought the highest figure and instead pay attention to art that cannot be bought. It might be time to take a closer look at art that is not created only to be squirreled away in an alarmed, private collection. It might be time to place the spotlights squarely on art brought into existence for public consumption.

One of the best new museum buildings in the country is opening in Miami this month, the newly named Perez Art Museum Miami (PAMM). And as an added gift to South Florida, some of the works will be on the OUTside of the new Herzog & de Meuron-designed vitrine for art.

From Bilbao to Napa Valley, the large-scale, sculptural works of Jedd Novatt — especially pieces from his Chaos series — have been engaging viewers for years. Novatt, who works in bronze, self-painting Corten steel, aluminum and brilliant stainless steel,
welds the impossibly precarious together to bring us sculptures that celebrate dynamic disorder in a minimalist tradition. We caught the Paris-based American-born artist at the unveiling of his new addition to the sculpture garden coming to life at PAMM, opening this month in downtown Miami. The minimalist school of public art has literally formed the collective consciousness of what public art can do for public spaces, both good (think: Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate in Chicago’s Millennium Park) and bad. (Before Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc was dismantled under controversy in New York the artist commented famously, “Art is not democratic. It is not for the people.”) But public art today has exploded to reach out to us in myriad ways from the coolly cerebral to the sensually sublime.

For her mammoth installation at Port Everglades entitled Forces of Nature, Trade Winds and Ocean Currents, New York based artist Michele Oka Doner used interpretations of seed pods and shells that had washed ashore and had been collected over time. These pieces, of all different sizes, were carved in wax and cast in bronze for a 3,000 square foot installation of multicolored terrazzo. The long processional floor takes passengers on a trip from the blue of the sky towards the green of the water. The floor incorporates bits of abalone or “mother of pearl” into...
the blue of the sky and these fade or dissipate and then bits of natural shell are introduced as the terrazzo turns slowly to green, creating in the words of the artist “the look of an estuary, where the brackish water comes to meet fresh in such a nice, natural way.”

Oka Doner, whose studio was photographed and revealed to you in the December, 2012 issue of Tropic, was born and raised in South Florida and, we are told, was absorbed by her natural surroundings as a child, growing up in Miami Beach in the 1950s. The artist received her MFA from the University of Michigan in 1968, and has been creating large-scale organically informed works ever since. Oka Doner created Flight for the Reagan National Airport in Washington, D.C. As well as A Walk On The Beach at Miami International airport. In these very public spaces, as well as that at Port Everglades in Fort Lauderdale, Oka Doner, to borrow a well written phrase from her Wikipedia page, “understood the floor as an unused canvas.”

The rich, deep blue and green of the Port Everglades installation have a cool depth that draws your gaze downward, the bronze pieces worn smooth and shiny by the steps of some of the hundreds of thousands who pass over them each year. The overall effect is marvelous — in the truest sense of that word — whether one is boarding a Caribbean-bound cruise ship, or returning from a...
much needed rest. It’s site-specific, nature-based, and experiential, if only in a fleeting way, and it’s art that everyone who passes gets to enjoy.

In Miami, working with the Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places program Oka Doner recently finished a project called Sargassum for the Miami International Airport’s Metrorail station. Visitors and returning residents who move from the airport to public transit are gifted with a walk under the artist’s etched glass vestibule ceiling. The effect of sun reflecting through the etched depictions of seaweed and algae is akin to a snorkeling experience, shadows thrown softly here and there. Again, the artist connects us to the original nature of the place — South Florida — and for those of us who live for the sound of tree frogs at night or the sound of palm fronds brushing in the sea breeze, Oka Doner’s work is a breath of fresh air in an increasingly overbuilt, electronic world.

In the end, whether public art takes the form of non-representational pieces like Novatt’s Chaos SAS or a more direct reflection of nature like Oka Doner’s Forces of Nature, the fact that municipalities like Dade and Broward Counties toil to make this a reality is a gift to all of us. And the fact that successful programs like Broward County’s 2% For Art and Miami-Dade’s Art in Public Places can create art to be enjoyed and touched by all — not simply wealthy collectors — is the best art of all.

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A detail of Jedd Novatt’s Chaos SAS, photographed in black and white by Robin Hill is proof that the work changes completely when viewed from different angles or in different light.