

PHOTO FINISH

Former fashion photographer helping morph Fort Myers business district

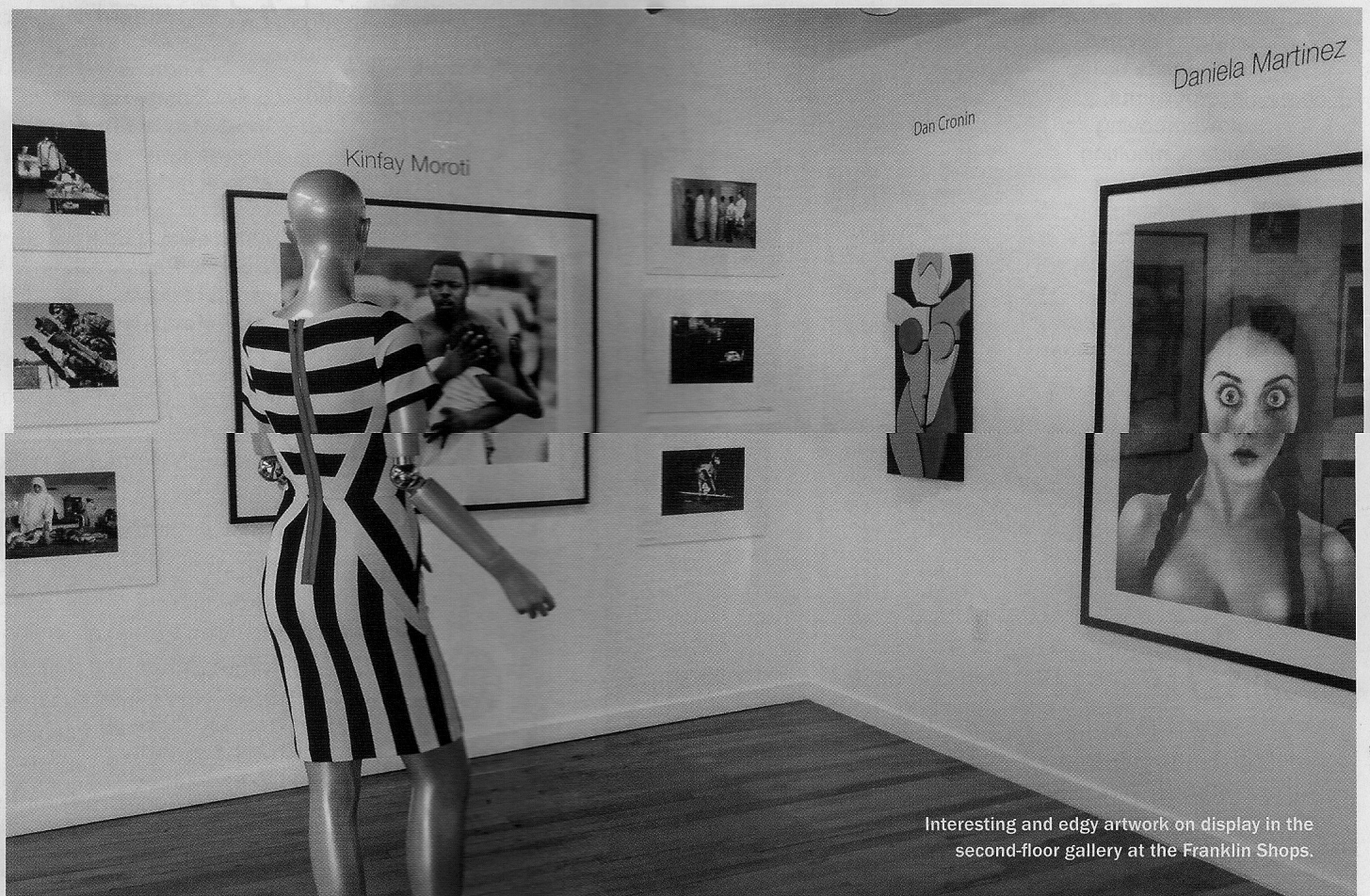
BY RENEE NOVELLE

There are few spaces similar to the Franklin Shops in downtown Fort Myers. A converted warehouse at First Street and Broadway with a deep history in the area, the current modern occupants have kept the space open, airy and bright. Walking past the glass doors at the front of the building, I'm overwhelmed by the number of vendors, the vastness of selections and the variety of products that expand before me. From clothing lines to cafés, organic lip balms to modern art, truly this space seems to embody it all.

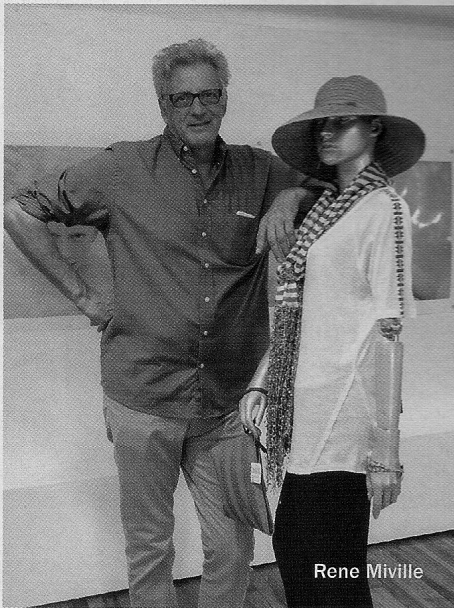
Perched in one of the comfortable, white leather seats at the second-story café that's bursting with activity is building owner Rene Miville. He greets me with a friendly smile, though his analytic eyes peer sharply down at me through dark-rimmed glasses—frankly I would expect nothing less from this former

Vogue photographer turned renowned artist. There's even a Public Broadcasting Service documentary about him, which he's quick to recommend. His tall, angular frame moves quickly as we relocate, and he gestures toward points of interest with a casual effect, not least of which are the photographs of his model-beautiful daughters that hang above the centralized checkout counter.

After a few minutes of chatting with him, I realize that his photography career started much like the development of the Franklin Shops—all in one instant, and without much forethought. A younger Miville had purchased his first camera on impulse from a friend, and spent that afternoon taking five rolls of pictures of everything that came across his path. When a modeling agency saw some of his work soon after, he was hired



Interesting and edgy artwork on display in the second-floor gallery at the Franklin Shops.



Rene Miville

“It was an impulse purchase. I’d always wanted a piece of downtown.”

—Rene Miville

on the spot and never looked back. Now his work is displayed at the Museum of Art in Boca Raton, among many others around the nation—with only one piece in his own gallery that occupies the majority of the second floor in the Franklin Shops.

It was much the same with the Franklin building, I learn. “It was an impulse purchase. I’d always wanted a piece of downtown,” he confesses of his acquisition. Developing the business that it has become today was happenstance. “Someone contacted me and wanted to rent the building to start a retail co-op. Knowing it would be tough for her to find investors, I said I would be her investor since I own the building. I thought it would be very interesting for the downtown to have a large retail development. Unique and eclectic.”

The idea took off. “We’re very proud of the fact that people choose us to exercise their right in the American Dream,



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Overview of the Franklin Shops (top), the second-floor café offers healthy smoothies and snacking choices (middle), store facade at First and Broadway in downtown Fort Myers.

with the shops.” In fact, many who started their brands here have gone on to expand their lines throughout Southwest Florida.

The two business partners have since parted ways, but Miville still oversees the operations of the vendors, which has offered him vibrant experiences that his role in running a hedge fund could never match. “These three ladies worked together, they sold little jewelry, and they wanted to talk with me because they were concerned about their sales doing well.” After diplomatically hearing their concerns and assessing the situation, Miville agreed to move them to a more prominent location in the store at no additional charge... until their operation began realizing additional profits. “I’ve done day transactions making seven numbers on a stock, and nothing compared to the joy in these ladies’ hearts. They were so happy, it just touched me.” This self-described “perfect Italian son,” who still lives across the street from his mother, smiles warmly at the memory. “Those moments are sacred. That was my most joyous memory, I’ll never forget that.”

Though his interactions with customers and vendors are memorable, it’s the events that are his favorite part of the store. From opera singers to sword dancers, book signings to live body painting, the Shops have been known to draw a crowd. “I think the entertainment factor is wonderful,” he exclaims, and his staff seems to agree.

“It’s so interesting,” Stephanie Cole, an employee at the Shops, says of the eclectic visitors who come through, “because you get to hear their stories, and hear their backgrounds, and why they’re here in Fort Myers, of all places.”

He’s created a reputation for himself as a notable artist, a prominent businessman and the father of the nation’s first emergency Beach Restoration Act, but Rene Miville isn’t yet finished. “My dream is to be involved in a company that I can help start that will help the needs of a billion people. Solve the billion person solution.”

We certainly look forward to that.

Renee Novelle is an author and freelance journalist living in Southwest Florida.

