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**Carlos Alves Beautifies Mitchell Airport**



When I first saw the terrazzo mosaics sweeping down Mitchell International Airport's Concourse C, I stopped in my tracks. How did these marvelous creations I was walking on come about? The answer, I discovered, lay in a happy marriage between architects Engberg Anderson, Milwaukee County's 1% for Public Art Program and Carlos Alves, a fantastically gifted Miami-based artist.

Alves' design visualizes Wisconsin from aerial and ground perspectives, moving from the rural to the urban. Farm fields of green flow toward the cool blue of Lake Michigan, the journey punctuated by 14 huge medallions—treasures to behold. My favorites: Three Rivers maps out ancient American-Indian trails, villages and mounds; Skyline of Steeples highlights St. Josaphat, City Hall and North Point Water Tower, among others; a classic Map of Industries illustrates where paper towels, dairy cows and cherries rule.

Alves created the individual ceramic images in his South Beach studio. Then he and his wife shopped Milwaukee stores for tiles later shattered into thousands of pieces for brilliant background fields. "Chip it, smash it. Put it back together and give it a whole new life," Alves says. The shards glow in their new terrazzo settings, a galaxy of jewel-box gems.

Speaking enthusiastically by phone from Miami, Alves says he took his first ceramics class in school when he was eight years old. "I made tacky coffee coasters that my dad sold in the Bahamas," he adds. Following his muse, he earned a master's in ceramics from the University of Illinois-Chicago and fell in love with the Midwest. "I've worked around the world—London, Hong Kong, now a firehouse in Los Angeles—but this Florida boy always loves coming back to the Midwest," he says. "I love your beautiful, beautiful city."

Alves worked five fulfilling, consuming years on the airport project before completing it when Concourse C reopened in 2007.

Great art, it's been said, focuses on the particular and the cosmic. That is true of these mosaics, I believe.

With Alves' sweeping backgrounds and foregrounds flecked with arrowheads, cogs, lighthouses, motorcycles and cheese, we voyage through Wisconsin from the specific to the sublime. How marvelous.

Bravo Carlos Alves. Bravo Milwaukee County. Bravo Mitchell Airport.

*photograph courtesy of Shepherd Express*