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Art Underworld: South Florida Becomes Hot Spot for Stolen, Fake Art

Published at 4:18 PM EDT on May 11, 2018 | Updated at 8:53 AM EDT on May 12, 2018

The underground art world is thriving with pieces from all different countries getting smuggled into the United States. South Florida has become a hot spot for stolen art, according to federal agents.

Hialeah artist Abel Quintero is aware of this growing black market of art, that's why he takes an extra step to protect his works of art.

"I sign and use my own thumbprint," Quintero explained. He marks his contemporary art pieces with his own thumbprint to avoid the spread of fakes. The rising number of fakes and forgeries has worsened with technology. This has prompted the

Department of Homeland Security to train its agents to detect bogus art works that try to pass as the real thing.

“Frankly, I think Miami is a big risk. There is a serious, strong art community here. Any place where you have galleries, museums...I think you’ll probably see a larger amount of the underground art market,” explained Special Agent in Charge Mark Selby, Homeland Security Investigations.

Russ Kodner, owner of Kodner Galleries in Dania Beach, is always on the lookout for fakes.

“There’s people that walk through our doors every day, bringing items to get appraised, bringing in items to get converted into cash and a lot of times we turn them away,” Kodner explained.

Art and cultural property crime -- which includes theft, fraud, looting, and trafficking -- has estimated losses in the billions of dollars annually. At one point, the federal government said it’s the third highest grossing criminal trade behind drugs and guns.

Thieves also smuggle in historical artifacts stolen from other countries.

Homeland Security officials said they have been able to find and return more than 8,000 stolen items in the last 10 years. Thieves are taking precious items, Agent Selby said. Earlier this year, someone at Miami International Airport tried to smuggle a Corinthian helmet which dates back to 500 B.C.

“There’s a lot of history that’s being stolen from countries all over the world. A lot of it ends up here in the United States,” said Agent Selby. “Once they remove those items, they haven’t had a chance to be studied where they were found. It’s lost forever. There’s no way you can get it back.”