The annual “Aesthetics & Values 2012” exhibit, organized by the Honors College at FIU, has matured with age, until this year, when it has reached prime time. The show combines students — many of whom have no connection to an arts program — with established artists, who together come up with a survey of local contemporary art and set it up in the Frost Art Museum, a Knight Arts grantee.

This year’s version can truly be said to be not just one of the best in the series, but one of the best shows at the Frost. Under the inspired guidance of professor and artist John Bailly, it is entirely curated by the students, who come from diverse fields, such as psychology, marketing, geology, finance and international relations. They picked the artists, the layout of the exhibition and created the catalogue. The end result feels nothing like a student show.

The distinct works of Robert Chambers get a good hearing here on the ground level space. He plumbs scientific and mathematical bases to come up with his sculptural compositions, in this case marble balls spaced out on the floor in an astronomical-looking grid; and out in the pond, with a white, oblong piece that seems to change geometric form as it floats around.
In the hallway on the way to the main room, a photo essay by veteran artist Ed Levine of a nun on a train in New York City unfolds. On the back wall is one of the intriguing paintings made entirely from brightly colored tape from Kuhl & Leyton; the vibrant color disguises the dark underpinnings of the imagery, a grim crime scene based on a real-life mass-murder — it's been taped off. Also in this room on opening night was a performance from David Rohn, in which he was encased in a wood-block suit; only his hands and head stuck out; the collaborative effort here must have been great for the students, as it turned out to be an outstanding piece. The “birdhouse” from Luis Garcia-Nerdy added to the balance in this room. In another, the work from Gavin Perry sealed the deal, proving that this was a good, strong show. Not just the pieces themselves, but the placement as well is a high-water mark. However, this is just touching on parts that make up the whole, which also includes works from other notable locals Robert Behar & Rosario Marquardt, Gean Moreno, Jillian Mayer and Jiae Hwang.
As an added bonus, make sure to go up the stairs and visit a show that will sneak up on you in an unexpected way. Some amazingly colorful — no, bursting with tropical color — paintings await. The verdant green landscapes, covered in leafy trees and flowers, all drawn in a simple and naive style, are dotted with scenes of extreme violence. Tiny, stick versions of men and women lay on roads and in houses, decapitated, limbless, with terrible red splashes interrupting the idyllic, rural panorama. “The War We Have Not Seen” is actually a rehabilitation project of sorts, for the victims of atrocities in Colombia. These 17 works were depicted by 35 men and women swept up in the civil and drug wars, who spent two years painting their memories of the hell they lived through. It’s a terrible beauty.

“Aesthetics & Values 2012” runs through April 20; “The War We Have Not Seen” runs through July 1; at the Frost Museum of Art at FIU, 10975 S.W. 17th St., Miami; thefrost.fiu.edu.