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The Miami fairs

by James Panero

A recap of Art Basel and a look at the Pérez Art Museum Miami



When Art Basel brought its art-fair franchise to Miami Beach in 2002, the worlds of sand, spectacle, and real-estate speculation turned out for a new pagan rite celebrating contemporary art's tumescent wrongs. Art Basel's orgy of art in the first week of December each year quickly came to embody the excesses of the contemporary market. It also attracted a hedonistic class of fractional-jet-owning migrants to feed off the fury. "They were a wriggling, slithering, writhing, squiggling, raveling, wrestling swarm of maggots rooting over and under one another in a heedless, literally headless, frenzy to get at the dead meat," writes Tom Wolfe, in *Back to Blood*, of the billionaires queuing up outside Entrance Hall D of the Miami Beach Convention Center. Elevated in this "riot of cocktail receptions, dinner parties, after-parties, covert cocaine huddles," and "inflamed catting," as Wolfe calls it, the valueless became the vaunted under the December Miami sun. Through the toxic shock of the new, the revelers of Art Basel danced over the past, including Miami's own regional culture, in pursuit of some freshly body-waxed avant-garde.

After years of avoiding it, this past month I packed up the Ray-Bans and went to see it for myself. What I discovered is that Art Basel has a flipside—a seemingly underside, even, to the vapid sheen. Granted, I arrived once the doors had already opened. This meant Miami was already *over* as far as the A-listers were concerned, and Larry Gagosian had already been quoted calling the whole affair a "social rat fuck." After two days of touring every square inch of Convention Center floor, a half-dozen satellite fairs, a handful of private collections, and the new Pérez Art Museum Miami, peeking out beneath the decadence, I must report, were glimmers of decorum. That's right: behind the veil of immodesty that is Art Basel Miami Beach there existed a thin thread of respectability, high-mindedness, and serious art.

Even the chthonic maw of the Art Basel fair itself had not been so thoroughly scrubbed of sobriety. In that golden grid that turns Miami's aging Convention Center floor into the Taj Mahal of art viewing, where billions of dollars of work are divided among the cubbies of some 250 international galleries, one could find art's best and worst battling it out in a Manichean struggle over what piece made for the best selfie. (This year's winner was Jeff Koons's

elephant ornament and tinfoil Easter egg at Gagosian; honorable mention went to Jack Pierson's *MOTHERFUCKER* sign at Richard Gray Gallery.) To be sure, Art Basel wasted little time turning up the sleaze by positioning the Helly Nahmad Gallery by the front door. Last November, after an extensive investigation by the Manhattan U.S. attorney, the gallery's playboy owner pleaded guilty to running a high stakes gambling ring with ties to Hollywood celebrities and the Russian mob. By selecting him for the prime spot, Art Basel asked, "Will that be cash, credit, or poker chips for your Miró?" Yet there just down the first aisle to the right was Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, with a booth that told a concise history of modern art through a handful of brilliant pairings. On one side was a landscape by Walter Pach, *The Wall of the City* (1912), that had appeared in the 1913 Armory Show. Naumann unearthed it from a collection in Greece, and the painting made a reappearance in "The New Spirit: American Art in the Armory Show" at the Montclair Art Museum last year. Next to it was Pach's abstract composition *Sunday Night* of 1916—a work that spoke to the jump many American artists made in the face of the Armory's Europeans, and not always successfully. Following up on the theme, Naumann was offering his reprint of a charming 1913 illustrated book called *The Cubies' ABC* that attempted to explain The Armory Show in nursery rhyme. (For \$35, I bought one; perhaps the least expensive purchase ever made at Art Basel.) Rounding out the booth, Naumann also offered a focused show of Man Ray as printmaker.

Across the aisle, David Nolan Gallery paired a series of Mel Kendrick maquettes with the artist's recent extra-large works on paper. For years Kendrick has brought a remarkable internal logic to his sculptures, carving a constructivist nugget out of a cube base and placing one on top of the other, with the positive and negative volumes equally reflected in the final work. When Kendrick scaled these up in striped cement for Madison Square Park in 2009, the success of the approach was a shot in the arm for rigorous sculpture. What can get lost in the volumetric shapes, however, are the abstracted forms Kendrick draws into them. At Nolan, through the rich textures of his works on paper, created by pressing forms into spongy pulp at high pressure, Kendrick brought his abstractions back to the surface with a kind of sculpture in relief.

Other smart presentations at Art Basel included Mary Boone, with the mosaic paintings of Joe Zucker next to the diagrams of Peter Halley and the *Colored Vases* of Ai Weiwei; Landau Fine Art, which converted its booth into an intimate salon of modern masters; Acquavella, with the latest from Wayne Thiebaud; Michael Rosenfeld, with the unsung painters Charmion von Wiegand and Alma Thomas; and Hirschl & Adler, with the outsider artist James Edward Deeds and the transcendental painter Emil Bisttram. The visual strength of each of these presentations demonstrated how the organizers behind Art Basel wanted more than spectacle out of their exhibitors. Art Basel's twenty-five shows within shows, called "Kabinetts," even highlighted galleries that brought an extra level of curatorial intelligence to the floor. Deeds, Kendrick, and Man Ray were each part of this program that helped to turn the fair into more than a three-billion-dollar tag sale.

The same cannot be said for Art Miami, the largest of Art Basel's independent "satellite fairs," which put down its catering tent back across Biscayne Bay in Midtown. Art Miami predates Art Basel's arrival by over a decade but felt thoroughly B-side, even if it seemed more packed than the Convention Center. While Art Basel could make bad art look good, Art Miami made good art look bad, with tight, noisy aisles that were like a carnival midway. In the middle of one of them was the heart-balloon painting by the graffiti artist Banksy. Cut from its original location, it can now be yours along with a large chunk of Red Hook wall. Nevertheless, past the Maserati VIP lounge (where VIP status earned you a free can of Perrier), there was a beautiful Helen Frankenthaler (*Red Shift* from 1990) at James Barron Art and other interesting work at Context, the fair's recent addition for mid-career artists, including abstractions by Bushwick-based Paul Behnke at Markel Fine Arts. With a fair on every corner, much of the conversation in Miami revolves around what to see, what you've seen, and what you missed. I had to forego the Scope, Pulse, and Nada fairs, and only popped my head into something called Red Dot, which resembled a foreclosed Grand Union. I did spend some time at a fair called Aqua, in a (former?) fleabag hotel on Collins Avenue. Save for the excellent Robert Henry Contemporary, with its superb color studies by Richard Garrison, the less said about this, the better.

Miami Project, a fair out of Williamsburg, Brooklyn enjoying its second year in Miami and located in an undistinguished tent down the block from Art Miami, showed some of the best work anywhere. Dedicated to U.S. galleries with a "serious commitment to important living artists" or "extensive involvement with remarkable estates," Miami Project lived up to its claims. After seeing Dustin Yellin's apocalyptic vision, which was like John Martin's *The Deluge* encased in glass, at Phong Bui's magisterial exhibition "Surviving Sandy," I was excited for Yellin's smaller works at Richard Heller Gallery. A large Chuck Webster from his recent show at Betty Cuninghame made an appearance at Steven Zevitas. The geometric abstractions of Devin Powers—an artist to watch—looked great at Lesley Heller. Margaret Thatcher Projects had exquisite colored sculptures by Heidi Spector. And Tibor de Nagy, new to Miami, brought must-have paintings by Shirley Jaffe and Nell Blaine. The one sour note emanated from the Joshua Liner Gallery. Here the artist David Ellis had rigged up a typewriter and a box of bottles to play the tune from Grandmaster Flash's rap classic "The Message," which could be heard throughout the fair tent. The

programming that went into this work was undoubtedly ingenious, and several exhibitors told me they wanted to buy it so they could smash it to bits.



Rachel Beach at Blackston at Untitled

Another recent arrival, certainly the most brilliantly rethought fair in Miami, is called Untitled. Here's an idea: Since Miami Beach has, you know, a beach, why not create a fair that looks out on more than a parking lot? So last year Untitled designed a tent that could go right on the beach, with translucent panels (such as we've seen at Frieze New York) that wash the exhibitors in just the right amount of natural light. Unlike the rat races at other fairs, Untitled had a blissed-out vibe, with a patio overlooking the sea. Maybe that's a bad thing when it comes to art sales, in the way that casinos don't like windows. Still, the change was refreshing, and the art on display reflected a younger, alternative spirit. Bushwick's Microscope Gallery had "Time Capsules" by Amos Poe—newspapers covered in colored duct tape from 2006 and 2007—which turned the news cycle into haunting geometric collages. Auxiliary Projects, another Bushwick venue, featured a flat file full of casual drawings of the mundane by Adam Thompson. Todd Kelly's plaid abstractions at Asya Geisberg had a similarly relaxed feel, even as they were composed of obsessive mark-making. The bloggers at Art F City were turned fair exhibitors with Tumblr-inspired work. And (much like Frieze) sculpture looked especially good in Untitled's ambient light. Alois Kronschlaeger had an eye-poking metal grid at Site:Lab punching through the floor to the white sand beneath. Blackston also featured the wonderful work of Rachael Beach—part painted sculptures, part sculptural paintings—that plays with our sense of surface and volume.

Art fairs weren't the only game in town. Miami uses Art Basel to show off its museums and private collections. This past December, the formerly Young British Artist Tracey Emin—who is like a U.K. boy band that can never quite cross over to the U.S. market—was making a go at her first American museum exhibition at North Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art. I also found the private Margulies, Rubell, and Pérez collections intriguing. Sorry . . . I misspoke there. *Pérez* is now a *public* obligation, after Jorge M. Pérez, the "Donald Trump of the tropics" (according to *Time*), bought off the public Miami Art Museum for \$40 million in "cash and art," even as Miami-Dade taxpayers floated a bond of \$100 million for the project. For less than it should cost to get the naming rights on a bathroom, Pérez got the whole Pérez Art Museum Miami, which opened over Basel week in a new Renzo-Piano-on-steroids facility designed by Herzog & de Meuron. More than the name, the PAMM must now act as custodians for Pérez's dreary personal collection, which casts the entire museum in the pall of identity politics. (What is it with these capitalist dogs and the art of the oppressed?) It should be said that a few (non-Pérez) side exhibitions here were excellent: "Amelia Peláez: The Craft of Modernity" brought a splendid Cuban painter to light, and a room of printed work from the Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry was remarkable. It was also good to see Ai Weiwei's touring retrospective brought down from the Hirschhorn. Yet until taxpayers float another bond to buy back their museum, the scandal of the Perez assures us that even if Miami at times seems serious about culture, an orgy of consumption is never far from view.