

A Carnival of Art, Money, Surf and Sand

By Roberta Smith

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MIAMI, Dec. 2 - Miami the first week in December is something like an opening of the Venice Biennale without the biennale, a decentralized sprawling mass of excitement and display, plus lots of disposable wealth. It is the art world's version of Mardi Gras, and not surprisingly, the word carnival is ubiquitous in conversation.

Everyone seems to understand that all art world eyes are briefly on Miami. The Guggenheim Museum held a party here last night to announce the shortlist of nominees for its Hugo Boss Prize. The Whitney Museum timed the announcement of its 2006 biennial artists to coincide with the events here, which raised a few eyebrows. Art Basel Miami Beach opened at the Miami Beach Convention Center on Wednesday afternoon. By noon on Thursday at least five smaller art fairs had followed suit -- NADA, Scope, Pulse, Aqua and Frisbee -- bringing the total of visiting art galleries camped out in varying degrees of comfort here to around 500.

The museum delegations -- directors, curators and some 90 groups, according to Art Basel Miami Beach -- were also in motion, touring the fairs or heading for various local museums, foundations and private collections where fresh exhibitions and baked goods were at the ready. There is a beautiful exhibition of paintings by the German bad boy Albert Oehlen at the Museum of Contemporary Art and an imposing show of videos and drawings by William Kentridge at Miami Art Central, which the collector Ella Fontanals Cisneros founded two years ago. Another equally Cisneros space, the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, opened for the first time on Thursday with an extensive exhibition of recent video and photography.

By Thursday night, more exhibitions had opened in the Miami Design District, including big shows organized by Deitch Projects of Manhattan and Pierogi of Brooklyn, and at the Moore Space, the brainchild and ward of the collector Rosa de la Cruz -- all in commercial spaces made available by the collector and real estate entrepreneur Craig Robins.

The Miami phenomenon is a dish with many chefs, not the least of whom are the city's private collectors, who seem to have DNA from both Charles Saatchi and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. But the one who originally turned on the heat is Samuel Keller, director of the prestigious Art Basel fair in Switzerland.

In 2000, Mr. Keller decided to start a fair in the United States and chose the least Swiss city he could find: a place with a decided Latin beat, where sun, surf and skin are the hedonistic norm, horizontality rules the geological terrain and real estate is still relatively cheap. Now in its fourth hugely successful incarnation, Art Basel Miami Beach is the only world class art fair with beach in its name, brought to you by a company from the planet's most efficient landlocked country.

"Sam Keller didn't just change art fairs; he changed the art world," said Thea Westreich, a New York art adviser, while waiting for her luggage at Miami International Airport on Tuesday night.

Less than 48 hours, but miles of art later, Mr. Keller politely demurred. A trim man with a shaved head, he was standing near the entrance to the art-filled house of Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz overlooking Biscayne Bay. "I didn't change anything, but I tried to stay very close to the changes," he said. "We've learned from the people who criticize us, who didn't want to go. Fairs need to make economic sense, but they also need to make cultural sense."

It is clear that a lot of economic sense is being made. Although the sales tend to decrease as you move down the art-fair food chain, and dealers are almost uniformly sunny in their pronouncements to roving journalists, quite a bit of money has been changing hands. As the London (former New York) dealer Kenny Schachter said to *The Art Newspaper*, which goes from a monthly to daily publication during the Basel fairs, "\$25 million is the new million."

At Art Basel Miami Beach, which ends on Sunday, a somewhat disenchanted art collector said, "People will buy anything with paint on it," while confessing that he had just bought a painting himself. But he added, alluding to the high prices and big spenders, "For the not-rich guys like me, it's not so much fun anymore."

Yet some people appear to be having fun. At Art Basel Miami Beach, the colorful abstract paintings of Mary Heilmann are installed on walls whose bright colors Ms. Heilmann had selected herself. Up and down the aisles, the generations and styles fluctuate wildly. You may find a quiet eddy, as in a small room of early Dubuffets or a cluster of works by Max Ernst at Hopkins-Custot.

On the fair's outer perimeter, the Art Nova section has the younger invited dealers, and things are less predictable. At Andrew Kreps, the performance artist Jamie Eisenstein is spending quite a bit of time in a soft-sided suitcase that she had laboriously turned inside out. According to her thinking, everything in the world was contained by the suitcase, except her. At Baudach, the romantic grisaille paintings of Thomas Zipp make an impression, especially once you notice that they are all tied compositionally into the large reproduction of a Jackson Pollock painting, also grisaille, behind them.

An interesting sign of the times: at Art Basel Miami Beach, I found my first museum booth. It belongs to New York City's own Museo del Barrio, represented by Beatriz de la Mora, the museum's associate director, who is sharing the space with an art installation from its permanent collection by Charles Juhasz-Alvarado. Calling the fair "a wonderful proposition for us," Ms. de la Mora said, "The art fairs have a tremendous appeal to people who are afraid of museums" and added that part of her mission was to "take the fear out of 104th Street."

The scene is more consistently rough around the edges and younger at NADA (New Art Dealers Alliance), where the floor is concrete, not carpeted; the lights flickered repeatedly on opening night; and the best food of any of the fairs comes from a Cuban-food truck parked out back.

At NADA, a question about unfamiliar work by an unknown artist can elicit the answer, "She's going to be in the Whitney Biennial." That's how Francisco Rovira, a 26-year-old dealer from San Juan, P.R., identified Carolina Caycedo, the maker of a banner that said, aptly, "Immigrants Change Home Cultures," and of a bright jukebox whose pulsating music turned out to be reggaetón. The jukebox holds the entire history of this 15-year genre, which blends reggae, dance music and hip-hop. And yes, there's a good chance you'll see, and hear it, at the Whitney.

In many ways what is going on around the fairs is as interesting as what's in them. In opening their houses and warehouses to the public this week, collectors are essentially enthusiastically demonstrating art's private uses -- "Try this at home!" But there's also a significant conversation about time, installation and taste going on.

The warehouse holding the collection of Don and Mera Rubell, transplanted New Yorkers, combines the pristine finish and the curatorial sharpness of a top-level museum. On view is an excellent show of Keith Haring's early work; a so-so but informative one of young Polish painters; and "Seriality," which juxtaposes an installation by Cady Noland with works of newcomers like Kelley Walker, Wade Guyton and Nate Lowman, who are in her debt.

A perfect antidote to such spareness (and hipness) is available a few blocks away at the much messier warehouse of the longtime Miami collector Martin Z. Margulies. Here, time slows considerably and the sediment of art worlds past is visible, as in a corner holding the work of Frank Stella, the 1970's sculptor Donna Dennis and Jason Rhoades. But most affecting of all are Mr. Margulies's evidently vast holdings in photography, which wind among the objects and installations from Rodchenko through Walker Evans and Helen Leavitt to Alex Soth and beyond. The impassioned indifference to the distinctions between mediums is inspiring. A lingering thought: More museums should try this at home.