

ART BASEL

‘All the galleries save their best for Miami.’ Miami Art Week is bigger than ever.

BY JANE WOOLDRIDGE, ANDRES VIGLUCCI, AND SIOBHAN MORRISSEY

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Argentinean artist Leandro Erlich's "Order of Importance," which is made of 66 life-size sand sculptures of cars, can be seen on display in Miami Beach on Tuesday, December 3, 2019. The exhibition can be found at the end of Lincoln Road on Miami Beach. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM

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It's on. Again. Even more chock-full o' art and near-frenzied buying and rubbernecking than ever, Miami Art Week blasted off on Tuesday as the city's premier fairs went big and bigger.

Art Miami, the popular homegrown affair that's become a true rival to the week's main event, Art Basel Miami Beach, debuted a 15-percent larger footprint, with more galleries and wider, cleaner aisles in its third year at the old Miami Herald building's bayfront site. And the high-level art was never more in evidence: Front and center inside the entrance is a massive piece, made of stacked blue cork, by British artist Jason Martin.

And Art Basel, which opens its main floor to very VIPs on Wednesday morning, upped the ante with its own splashy debut in the Beach convention center's vast ballroom — its newest sector, Meridians, dedicated to artworks far too massive for a regular booth (or even the living room of a McMansion.)

Thousands of VIPs turned up for a Tuesday preview of Meridians, on the top floor of the Convention Center. Unlike the regular convention center floor, Meridians features booths only for videos (such as Isaac Julien's nine-screen installation and films by Theaster Gates and Miguel Calderon), an aluminum Quonset hut by Oscar Tuazon, and a 25-foot-long painting by Sam Francis.

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There are more varieties of aesthetic experience available than ever this week, with the public inauguration of the [new Rubell Museum](#) and developer Jorge Pérez's [El Espacio 23](#) in Miami's working-class Allapattah neighborhood, and a new for-profit graffiti museum venture in Wynwood.

The week also marks special dates for some Miami art stalwarts. It's time to celebrate the [10th anniversary of Wynwood Walls](#) and the 30th anniversary of collector Martin Margulies' Collection at the Warehouse, also in Wynwood.

They are joined by hundreds of art galleries from all over the world that come to sell in what's become one of the hottest once-a-year markets anywhere, hoping to extend strong sales at fall auctions in New York and a perennially strong stock market. The once-parochial art world has morphed into a global industry, turning the visual arts into an investment as much as a matter of spirit or aesthetics, and Miami is a chief beneficiary.

"All the galleries save their best for Miami," said longtime Art Miami director Nick Korniloff, who is running the fair this year under new owners, Informa Markets, a U.K.-based events and exhibitions giant. The fair this year has 176 galleries, up 15 over last year, and its sister fair next door, CONTEXT, which focuses on smaller galleries and emerging and mid-career artists, added six. "And they're not only looking for the top 400 collectors in the world. They're also looking to educate new collectors from all over."

The weather woes that delayed the start of Monday night's conversation between DJ Swizz Beatz and superstar artist Kehinde Wiley by two hours had subsided by Tuesday. And despite ongoing chatter about the financial health of Art Basel's parent company — including a report in the New York Post quoting company officials as denying the Basel fairs are for sale — hundreds queued for VIP hours for satellite fair Untitled, one of two fairs on the sands of Miami Beach.

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Untitled proved rich ground for art enthusiasts looking for works by black artists, with works by highly regarded South African photographer Zanele Muholi and emerging artists including Ghanaian painter Patrick Quarm and recent Pratt Institute graduate Alanna Fields. Black artists, including some with long productive careers, have experienced a surge in sales and critical appraisal in this woke artworld moment.

The current popularity is sometimes controversial, but one of today's hottest black artists, Mickalene Thomas, sees it as past-due recognition. "Sure it's a trend," she said at the opening of her new show at The Bass. "Will the bubble burst? Yes. But we finally have institutions recognizing the gap within their collections. What's important is for artists who are finally having their moment is to be smart about it, claim a space and move forward. Some of us will continue to make art we believe in and do our best. The hard work does pay off."

Another "rediscovered" artist, Chakaia Booker, who is in her 60s and was attired in a large headress and Dickies slacks, was basking in the attention of a group of German collectors at the Mark Borghi booth. The Palm Beach gallerist devoted the entire show to her work, mostly consisting of sculptural pieces made of shredded, discarded tires.

"She's important, and it's her moment," Borghi said. "People were not paying attention to her. She is a black woman, what can I say, but people are opening their eyes."

Shortly after VIPs were allowed into the Art Miami tent at 4:30 p.m., Borghi said, he sold a 1996 Booker piece for \$400,000.

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At Laszlo von Vertes' booth, the Zurich gallery sold two pumpkin paintings by another woman artist who has hit a high at an advanced age in a veritable flash. The pieces by Japan's Yayoi Kusama, 90, sold for nearly \$1 million, Von Vertes said, to the very first visitor to hit his booth.

Thomas and Booker were among a dozen or more top-tier artists in town, including William Kentridge, whose new video is at El Espacio 23 and Teresita Fernandez, whose work is the centerpiece installation at Pérez Art Museum Miami. Isaac Julien and Fred Wilson were among artists who came to oversee the installation of their large-scale works at Art Basel's Meridians.

For Miami gallerist David Castillo, who is showing the installation "Varla TV" by Miami artist Pepe Mar, the new sector offers another kind of experience for both visitors and artists. "It looks like a curator's vision, instead of an art fair. I think it will be a big hit."

Pace Gallery president Douglas Baxter is showing Wilson's installation that encompasses a full room. While he will show Wilson's work in his booth on the convention center floor, "this gives a fuller voice of the artist."

But it's not the only fair to believe bigger is better. On Tuesday, the Untitled fair also decided to focus on monumental works. Two Miami artists helped inaugurate the fair's Monuments program on Tuesday. Antonia Wright and Ruben Millares kicked off the program with an installation that calls into question power struggles among nations. Wright and Millares, who are partners in life and art, view the work as a means to challenge social conventions.

In times of peace, no flag of any nation should be placed above that of another nation. The artists deliberately flout that tradition with their latest work. Borrowing from Herman Melville's "Moby Dick," the installation is titled "It is not down on any map; true places never are" and features two 20-foot flagpoles that mechanically raise and lower the flags of 16 nations, symbolically changing the dynamics between the various countries.

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Located in Lummus Park at 12th Street and the beach in Miami Beach, the installation is reminiscent of a roller coaster with a chain that rhythmically chugs along, alternately pulling and releasing as the flags rise and fall in a constant loop.

And at the 15th annual Design Miami, inside a tent in a new park outside the Beach convention center, there was water everywhere — a broad acknowledgment of climate change and the threat of sea level rise that's a central theme this year.

Several of the 34 gallery exhibitions and 15 Curio presentations at the main fair, as well as satellite installations scattered throughout the area, tackled that theme, addressing subjects as disparate as too much water in some places and not enough in others.

Designers from Asia, Europe, and North and South America are using their exhibition space to highlight concerns ranging from sustainable water use to plastic pollution in the oceans. Many of these topics will be discussed throughout the duration of the fair through programming presented by the Savannah College of Art and Design, which will include lectures, workshops and film screenings.

Miami artist Emmett Moore's ingenious take on water references the ocean freighters that ship used clothing from Miami to the Caribbean and Latin America.

"When I was in high school I would see clothing in warehouses that were piled to the rafters and wondered where it is coming from and where it is going," Moore said. He soon discovered Miami was a hub for the collection of used clothing from as far away as Canada. In an homage to the recycling effort and the colorful design that shipping containers make when stacked in freighters that ply the Miami River, Moore decided to make a wall cabinet from used t-shirts. He coated the colorful shirts in epoxy and fashioned them into a shelving unit he calls "Express," a nod to the "Tropical Express," one of the shipping freighters involved in the used clothing trade.

Moore created the work in his Little Haiti gallery.



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