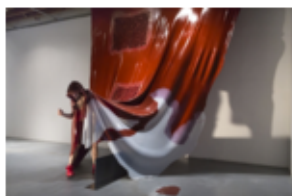


Art Basel Miami Beach 2015



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Art Basel Miami Beach
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by JILL SPALDING

Read the blogs and you would think Art Basel Miami Beach a pop-up, and the surrounding activities a Dionysian revel. Bounced off the klieg-lights of the Miami Heat basketball team playoffs, Monday's hip-hop performance by Jean Wyclef at the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), whose throbbing finale saw Jorge Pérez himself hoisted on to the sound blaster's shoulders, Tuesday's Design District kickoff with songster Lenny Kravitz moonlighting as a photographer at his "Flash" show, and art hipster Jeffrey Deitch parading a motorcycle gang and artist Rashaad Newsome's band through the streets, premiered ABMB week as a y'all-come hot happening. Happily, those who came for the art found a lot more.

The fair that launched in 2002 as a veiled excuse to sell real estate, this time around showcased 267 galleries and close to 4,000 artists, spawned 20 satellite fairs, green-lighted countless pop-up events and, for six days and counting, turned Miami into a city of hope. Attended by more than 35,000 artists, curators, collectors and viewers, ABMB 2015 remained, by its size, reach and gravitas, at the top of its game. Although its subtext was sales, fair week provided a swirl for the senses, with sound scraping the walls and fresh graffiti jumping off them. On the beach, across the bay and down the streets, its visual palette was Art – more art than you can search online in a day or a West Chelsea run-through in a week in New York.

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Monday served as a teaser with back-to-back openings of a handful of cutting-edge galleries – Gallery Diet among them with an outstanding one-person show of Ann Craven’s moonscapes – that are pioneering new, almost hot art zones in Little Haiti and Little River.

Tuesday jumpstarted the action with a first-time collaboration between the art world’s premier power foxes, Larry Gagosian and Deitch, who filled four floors of the Moore Building with more than 100 works by 50 artists that explicitly addressed the human figure. The sculpture, placed randomly to break up that numbing march down the wall, involved materials that ranged from a Duane Hanson clothed grandmother to a replaceable Urs Fischer melting candlewax full-length portrait of Zhou Yinghua (AKA Michael Chow – coincidental that Gagosian held the after-party at Chow’s *W* eatery?) More compelling, if not to everyone’s taste, were the cheek-by-jowl vibrant canvasses, painted the old-fashioned way, brush held in hand, by mostly unfamiliar artists whose commanding imagery countered the Jean-Michel Basquiat conceit of leaving the viewer to decipher a work’s meaning. Titled *Unrealism* – as much to indicate the show’s focus on the heightened and surreal as to comment on the ubiquitous label “untitled”, which serves as a lazy catch-all for work too of-the-moment to reference history, antecedents or fully thought-out ideas – the show was a not-to-miss tour de force, a revelation of the power of extreme figuration to elucidate the human condition – Tala Madani, Emily Mae Smith and Jonathan Gardner were among the standouts, with Jenny Saville, Richard Prince and John Currin among the 11 artists upholding the Gagosian brand.

Wednesday, as reported, the main event opened quietly – the early-entry VIP invitations having been cut down to time-tested collectors – but the press was too hasty to attribute the first hours’ hush to poor sales. If, in contrast to the satellite fairs where works priced between \$20,000 (£13,286) and \$40,000 were flying off walls, main fair buyers were taking their time, making notes, and smart-phone researching comparable gallery and auction sales, it was but to validate such hefty purchases as a 1954, \$15m Francis Bacon, a 1971, \$10.5m Picasso, two multimillion-dollar Warhol Mao paintings and a \$2m Jasper Johns Savarin coffee can monotype! There were no gee-whiz installations, but Jimmie Durham’s classic sculpture of a car crushed by a monolith, and a flashy assemblage anchored by a dead tree that Ai Weiwei had rendered in bronze provided irresistible photo-ops.

Virtually gone were fragile materials and unstable surfaces – the coffee, chocolate, feathers, blood, ashes and living plants that have been plaguing museum curators – though brilliantly executed exceptions, such as the collaged paintings Egan Frantz builds up from toilet paper traversed by blue-painted bicycle treads at the Michael Jon Art Nova space, sold out. Defining the fair experience, the work on exhibit was, as ever, largely market-driven, targeting maximum impact and branded recognition, but quality was high, with many presentations curated for reflection, grouped for immersion, and closely edited for sheer viewing pleasure.

The fair itself has matured; whether the consequence of a perceived market softening, or of the increasingly onerous expense of shipping, installing, lighting, staffing and lodging, gallerists had played it safe, or, more kindly, saleable, with material chosen less for eye-candy than depth. Highlights were rareties such as an André Kertész at Howard Greenberg, one of the mirror-

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distorted nudes from his famed Distortion series; a stellar bronze Mel Kendrick sculpture at David Nolan; and the pristine solo presentation of Robert Mangold's serene geometrics at Elvira González.

Marginalised for the most part, shiny pieces wrought by a team but produced as art and sold as art ceded to work "executed by the artist", as captioned under at least one work on display. And my 3D-printing fears proved premature. I could find only a dozen or so works thus produced, but that one was by Frank Stella and three were being shown by the eminent Berlin Galerie Thomas Schulte was unsettling.

Fair fatigue was limited to: "If I see one more Anish Kapoor ...!" By and large, viewers seemed reassured by the ubiquitous presence of Alex Katz and positively thrilled by the repeating portraits of Chuck Close as they glimpsed the artist himself manoeuvring his wheelchair between them, agreeable to photo-ops and dialogue with strangers.

Sparsely attended, due mainly to their corner positions, but of a seriousness that moved the fair experience into the realm of exploration and learning, were the closely curated special sections devoted to specific concerns such as (genuinely) emerging artists (Nova), work on paper or with media new to the artist (Editions), thoughtful mini-retrospectives (Kabinett) and rising international talent (Positions). Of particular significance, historical work overlooked by the market (Survey) called on the viewer to recalibrate: what, in the end, constitutes the art of today, that selected by the committee selecting the galleries, which in turn select the work to be shown – or the work being made by artists with no gallery, often working right under your nose?

The sign of when a fair grows up is when irony sets in. None seemed to pick up on the paradox of Larry Bell's stunning installation over a glitzy clothing store of The Factor of 36, his historic chrome-coated glass panels angled into a maze. Or on the move of the fiercely not-for-profit, affordably priced New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) fair to the shiny, unaffordable Fontainebleau. Or on the storied Galerie Gmurzynska peddling paintings by Sylvester Stallone. Or on the chance juxtaposition at ABMB of Joseph Kosuth's conceptual white neon lettering and a Tracey Emin come-on pink neon that questioned whether art of the past can dialogue intelligently with art of today. Or on the worlds-apart slick NetJet's flagship Bombardier Global 6000, parked at an outlying airfield, which Snarkitecture's Miami artist Daniel Arsham had been hired to ornament, and the jaw-dropping, 4,000lb, full-scale replica of a Soviet MiG-21 fighter jet, painstakingly reproduced by Miami artist Asif Farooq, using only paper and glue, and on display in his studio.

Or on co-sponsor Davidoff's installation in the pristine Miami Beach Botanical Garden of a lounge where guests could learn how to blend and roll its polluting cigars. Strangest was the last-minute injunction against Cuban artist Carlos Rigau's illegal immigrant piece involving a homemade raft he had planned to sail on to the beach – an illegal act become an illegal act once again. Wildest was the real-life stabbing that fairgoers thought a performance piece until reported otherwise by the press.

Thursday opened ABMB to the public and channelled the VIPs to the strongest of the satellite fairs. That the homegrown Art Miami together with its satellite, Context, now combines 215

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exhibitors, testifies to its growing importance to the local and Latin markets. Astounding to come across a pristine 9ft (2.75m) Alexander Calder in the entryway, refreshing to find the ubiquitous Damien Hirsts and Jeff Koonses offset by closely edited booths such as that which Bernice Steinbaum curated around “The Peaceable Kingdom”.

Tented on the beach, the Untitled fair impressed with booths curated by Nyehaus and Albertz Benda around West Coast eminents Ron Davis (whose \$300,000, nine-panel resin sold to Stallone) and Ed Moses (whose gridded interventions, priced at around \$40,000, sold fast); and created something of a happening with installed seating on Lawrence Weiner benches lettered A Respite At Some Point ASAP, and a tiki bar “presented” by the artist collective Helper that offered an inhouse liquor-spiked carrot/ginger cocktail called Jooice.

Pulse, the notoriously feisty fair seen as a stepping stone to ABMB, was pared down this year to 80 galleries, all tried and true – and successful, judging by the strong sales reported by such seriously curated galleries as Winston Wächter and Danziger – but came off as curiously sanitised, at once overly safe and dangerously facile; its target installation of faux-pop an embarrassment – a selfie opportunity, at best.

NADA, dear to first-time collectors for its original material and low prices, held back on its usual outré installations, but did well with artfully crafted work such as a David Adamo bubblegum-pink deflated balloon and sold out of affordable, artist-made limited-edition souvenirs.

Public – planted in Collins Park, the outdoor sculpture fair served once more as a respite, an opportunity to play and engage with name art; young and old dialled the sun through Francisco Ugarte’s needled Sunlight, fingered the bronze lace of Ursula von Rydingsvard’s reworked Bluff, stroked Sterling Ruby’s scarlet lips, danced around Tony Cragg’s double twirled maypole, sat in Hank Willis Thomas’s bent steel speech-bubble benches, and climbed on Marianne Vitale’s intrepid heap of railroad yard steel scraps. Was Tony Tasset’s outsized Deer ornament commenting on garden kitsch, itself kitsch? No matter, I loved it.

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