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St. Moritz Seeks Summer Art Lovers to Counter Glitzy Ski Image

Review by Catherine Hickley



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Sept. 5 (Bloomberg) -- Think of St. Moritz, and it's unlikely summer vacations and high culture will spring to mind.

Yet that's how the glamorous Swiss ski resort is seeking to promote itself with **St. Moritz Art Masters**, a new festival that runs through Sept. 7. It aims to be an annual fixture that will attract wealthy art lovers at a time of year when the town's myriad swish hotels are clamoring for guests.

The festival, which is financed by sponsors, the Engadine region tourism board and the local authority, seeks to achieve no less than "a new form of artistic life at the highest level, by bringing together visual and performing arts." Perhaps more realistically, it wants to "encourage

international networking."

On the guest list were the writer **Paulo Coelho**, conductor **Valery Gergiev** and photographer David Douglas Duncan. All that, surrounded by craggy Alpine views and sapphire lakes glistening in the sunshine (St. Moritz has more than 300 days of sunlight a year), sounded too good to be true.

The first edition, though strong on the glamour, fell short of the festival organizers' loftier aspirations. Still, the event did offer some highlights. Art shows by day are open to everyone, with exhibitions in a church, a ski school, a bank branch, a chalet restaurant and a spa pump room as well as in the resort's five-star hotels and art galleries.

Jesus in Chapel

The most striking is a show of photographs by David LaChapelle, best known for his stylized portraits of celebrities. Here, his series "Jesus Is My Homeboy" is exhibited in a Protestant chapel. The luridly colored pictures take scenes from the New Testament and plant them in the contemporary rap and hip-hop scene. In a church, the photos are at first startling yet apt.

A long-haired Jesus, clad in a simple light robe, has his feet washed by a blonde Mary Magdalene, crouched on the floor in red underwear and stilettos. At the last supper, Jesus is crowned by a halo of light, surrounded by dudes with dreadlocks and tattoos striking poses that recall Renaissance paintings.

The decaying old Paracelsus pump room houses an atmospheric exhibition of **Frank Stella** sculptures, his "Bali Pieces" made of tubes and foam. At the Kempinski Grand Hotel des Bains, "Woman in the Magic Mirror" is an amazing private collection of photographs -- all of women -- by such artists as **Robert Mapplethorpe**, **Helmut Newton**, Brassai, **Andre Kertesz**, **Henri Cartier-Bresson** and **Cecil Beaton**. The owner is photographer Amedeo Turello.

Pink Light

At its new bank branch, **Julius Baer Holding AG** is showing a selection of works from its contemporary Swiss art collection. **Daimler AG** is exhibiting geometrical abstracts, including an installation of wooden planks backed with pink lights by Anselm Reyle. Local galleries also have mounted special shows.

Sponsors including Daimler, Cartier and Julius Baer invite guests to classical concerts held at the resort's palatial old hotels in the evenings. Performers this year include Gergiev and the **Mariinsky Orchestra**, the Vienna-Berlin Chamber Orchestra, made up of players from the Berlin and Vienna philharmonics, and virtuoso viola player Yuri Bashmet, frequently spotted chain-smoking in the hotel bars.

It's easy to go wrong when mixing brand names and the arts, and there were some misses. A tribute concert to **Herbert von Karajan**, sponsored by Daimler, might have included works by Beethoven, Wagner or Mozart. Instead, it featured a series of hits by Vivaldi, Strauss and Dvorak -- all beautifully performed by the Vienna-Berlin Chamber Orchestra, though hardly works instantly associated with the late Austrian maestro.

Sequins, Suntans

On the first night, the musicians from Vienna and Bashmet, playing Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante, looked amused at their audience reception. The glamorous guests, dressed in sequins, silks and suntans, clapped appreciatively -- after every movement, all through the works by Rossini, Haydn and Mozart.

The concert, sponsored by Meridian Audio Ltd., was followed by a sumptuous dinner at the Kulm Hotel accompanied by strains of conversation in German, Italian, French and lots of broken English. A table full of what appeared to be toasters was perplexing: It later transpired that these were the company's ``transportable entertainment systems."

The festival was initiated by the improbably named Monty Shadow, a ubiquitous impresario-cum-arts-producer who teamed up with curator Reiner Opoku and Axel Zoerkendoerfer and Edgar Quadt from Artinvestor magazine.

It's hard to say whether it will catch on, or whether it will attract the creative elite it seeks. The organizers say they have funding for the next three years, so there is time to refine the concept. St. Moritz has glamour, luxury, a magnificent natural setting and plenty of money. What the festival lacks so far is an artistic theme or focus, and, perhaps, an audience of art lovers.

(Catherine Hickley writes for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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