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## Art Fair: Business Over Activism



Barbara Fernandez for The New York Times

Art Basel Miami Beach: The fair includes the mixed-media “Vespa” by Mark Handforth, at MOCA North Miami

By KAREN ROSENBERG

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MIAMI BEACH — Would this year’s edition of Art Basel Miami Beach be a private spectacle or a public one? I wondered that as I headed off to the art world’s ritualistic week of gawking, power schmoozing and peacocking, which is now a decade strong.

Certainly top collectors dominate the calendar, stir up the selling floor and preside over what are sometimes ludicrous displays of privilege. But some also open their houses, or at least their warehouses, to the masses.

And although you might need a V.I.P. card to party alongside A-Rod or celebrate the latest Ferrari model, as some revelers did this year, those who want to make art viewing the main activity have plenty of more accessible options. Not the least of them is the fair itself, which has swelled to include some 260 international exhibitors and a full program of outdoor sculpture, video and performance.

And whether you want to be occupied by Art Basel or Occupy it, you can't deny the event's role in [revitalizing Miami culture](#) over the past 10 years. (Both the Miami Art Museum and MoCA North Miami have new buildings in the works, and the Wynwood district is chockablock with galleries, studios and street art.)

All that said, a backlash seemed possible this year. There were rumors of an Occupy Wall Street-style protest, and a high-profile collector declared an intention to boycott the fair (Adam Lindemann, in his column in *The New York Observer*).

Mr. Lindemann showed up anyway. And the only activism I saw was folded, shrewdly, into the fair's "Art Public" section: a gathering space for Miami community groups, courtesy of the artists Andrea Bowers and Olga Koumoundouros, where you could pick up a leaflet or buy a T-shirt that said "99%."

No one seemed particularly worried about protests or the euro zone at the fair's V.I.P. preview in the Miami Beach Convention Center. The work, though, appeared more conservative than in years past.

The blue-chip selections were plentiful, among them an elegant display of Calder and Miró sculptures (at Helly Nahmad) and a stuffy-looking but rewarding

exhibition of Modiglianis, Soutines and other School of Paris artists (at Galerie Thomas).

Those looking for more of a party atmosphere could find it at Mary Boone, where Barbara Kruger's huge wall texts shouted "Money makes money" and other turns of phrase on the topic of filthy lucre. Just across the aisle, L&M had an equally snazzy booth wallpapered with Warhol's cows and festooned with a broad selection of his drawings.

Many other exhibitors relied on size to make a statement. Edward Tyler Nahem gave most of its booth to a 30-foot-long Frank Stella, "Khurasan Gate Variation III," from 1968. Everywhere, dealers were pulling out their tape measures.

The message, over all, was "We're here to do business," not "What does this all mean?" Only a few dealers, like Peter Blum, took shots at the fair environment. At his booth two paintings from a series called "Bankrupt Banks," by the Danish artists' group Superflex, caused many double-takes with their prominent corporate logos.

Some of the most ambitious displays could be found in the "Art Nova" section, where the official restrictions — only art made in the last three years, and no more than two or three artists per exhibitor — seemed to foster creativity.

The smallness of the booths was no obstacle to Untitled, host to an enthralling maze of painting, photography and drywall by Brendan Fowler and Matthew Chambers, or to Overduin and Kite, dominated by Dianna Molzan's marriage of dainty pastels and muscular formalism.

"The Art Kabinett," single-artist shows scattered throughout the fair, were

uneven. The better ones could be hard to find, as was the case with the Francis Alys slide show “Sleepers” (at Galerie Peter Kilchmann); others, like Elmgreen and Dragset’s “idealized gay sauna,” at Galeria Helga de Alvear, took over entire booths.

But the only real disappointment at the convention center was “Art Positions,” the section devoted to emerging artists and galleries. Much of the work looked meek and derivative, with the exception of Paulo Nazareth’s “Banana Market/Art Market,” a green Volkswagen van piled high with bananas.

Meanwhile, Theaster Gates and Emily Sundblad confirmed, in his sculptures and her paintings, that they are more exciting performers than object makers.

The New Art Dealers Alliance fair, at the Deauville Hotel, seemed to be a healthier place for young talent (and some not-so-young; Leo Koenig was showing photographs by Sigmar Polke.)

There was plenty of painting, most of it pretty good if not particularly adventurous. But sculpture, video and performance had their moments too. Sean Bluechel’s booth of cactuslike ceramics was a hit, as was Dave Miko and Tom Thayer’s shimmering, abstract video installation (at Eleven Rivington). And On Stellar Rays had photographs fresh from the performance artist Clifford Owens’s current MoMA PS1 survey.

For New Yorkers, Art Basel often seemed like an extension of the Performa biennial (which ended in late November). The fair’s increasingly prominent “Art Public” section, in Collins Park, had a full schedule of performances organized with the help of the on-site Bass Museum.

On opening night, you could see Theaster Gates and the Black Monks of Mississippi chant on a beachside stage, or help Glenn Kaino try to “levitate” his sculpture — a model of the 1939 World’s Fair — by holding the edge of its wooden platform.

You could also wander into the Bass and pour yourself a libation from one of Erwin Wurm’s “Drinking Sculptures,” bar cabinets named for heavy-imbibing artists, including Edvard Munch and Martin Kippenberger. They seemed both silly and cruel. Better to visit the Mark Handforth survey at MoCA North Miami, where his large-scale sculptures of twisted street signs offered potency without consequences.

And if you were up for a real museum experience, the Miami Art Museum’s [Faith Ringgold exhibition](#) delivered. New Yorkers who missed the show when it was at the Neuberger Museum at Purchase College in Purchase, N.Y., last fall now have another chance to be rocked by Ms. Ringgold’s 1960s series “American People” — a fearless and frank exploration of the civil rights era. If you had spent too long among the convention center’s shiny trophies, the mural-sized “Die,” with its cool gray background and red-hot gunfight scene, let you know it.

The exhibition at the [Rubell Family Collection](#) also promised a national conversation, along the lines of the Rubells’ 2009 show “30 Americans” (now at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington). But the title “American Exuberance” proved to be a catch-all for recent acquisitions like Sterling Ruby’s moody, spray-painted canvases. Only John Miller’s room of gold-painted, trash-strewn columns and porticos, which had a “Last Days of Pompeii” feel, cut through the cocktail chatter.

New to the collection circuit was “Home Alone,” an exhibition sampling the Adam and Lenore Sender Collection. This show in the Senders’ bayside home was available only by invitation, which was understandable, given the intimate spaces. The curator Sarah Aibel made mischievous use of the home’s nooks and crannies, installing a Sarah Lucas rooster in the master shower and two Elizabeth Peyton’s in a child’s closet.

It was a very private experience. But over the course of the week — even over the course of a day — I had many public ones that were just as memorable.

In that spirit was the renegade mini-fair SEVEN, where entry is free, and galleries share space on a “salon wall.” There, a vending machine by the artist Jennifer Dalton dispensed wristbands of the sort used to pass through velvet ropes. They read, “What this says does not matter.”

*Art Basel Miami Beach runs through Sunday at the Miami Beach Convention Center; [artbaselmiamibeach.com](http://artbaselmiamibeach.com).*

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: December 2, 2011***

An earlier version of this review incorrectly referred to Matthew Chambers as Matt Saunders. Mr. Saunders is another artist, who is showing at the booth of Harris Lieberman. It also misstated the length of Frank Stella’s “Khurasan Gate Variation III.” It is 30 feet long, not 12.