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Masks Off, Wallets Out: Art Basel 2022

On the 20th anniversary of Art Basel Miami Beach, its largest edition yet, the two Miamis — its emerging artists and its big collectors — meet across the gap.

MIAMI BEACH — When a curator asked the local artist Robert Chambers to come up with an installation for the 20th anniversary of the Art Basel Miami Beach fair — running this week through Saturday — he immediately described a project fully in character with his playful sense of provocation.

"I wanted to fill a food truck with a dozen of Miami's hottest emerging artists," Chambers explained. "I'd have a stunt driver race the truck at full speed onto the beach, and then flip it over on its side, so the artists and all their work spill out the back onto the sand." The curator's reaction? "He said his insurance carrier might have an issue or two," Chambers said with just a hint of wryness.

Fortunately for both the invited artists and Bridge Red, the artist-run exhibition space where Chambers's idea eventually landed, his revised project was decidedly safer while still demonstrating, as Chambers noted, "that there's as strong an art movement in Miami as there is in L.A. or New York City."

"The BluPrnt," a sprawling Chambers-organized group show of 181 Miami artists, encompasses multiple disciplines and generations. It tells a story of Miami's art scene, from its sleepy beginnings in the '60s and '70s, when it was more of a cultural afterthought than a destination; the changes wrought citywide through the '80s and '90s as successive waves of immigration transformed Miami's social fabric; and its evolution since the 2002 start of the annual Art Basel fair.

This year's fair, the largest edition yet, sees 282 of the world's top art galleries set up booths inside Miami Beach's Convention Center, drawing deep-pocketed collectors from around the globe. Beyond this genteel scrum, an accompanying weeklong cultural circus swamps the entire metropolitan area with a sea of pop-up events, satellite fairs, celebrity-studded corporate product launches, and not least, over-the-top parties.

That's a lot of activity to compete with, but "The BluPrnt" performs admirably as a guide to Miami's historic influencers and an exciting variety of emerging artists. Of the veterans, the Bridge Red co-founder and sculptor Robert Thiele has a collaboration with the sound artist Gustavo Matamoros, which bounces eerie tones and a recording of chirping Everglades grasshoppers between two hulking rows of Thiele's signature stone monoliths. The photographer Peggy Nolan contributes a pair of intimately staged, sexually charged shots, while a beguilingly surreal painting by Edouard Duval-Carrié lures viewers to take a deeper dive

into his work. Younger artists include Mark Fleuridor, whose quilt panels intriguingly split the difference between textiles and emotionally charged Black portraiture and Cornelius Tulloch, who contributes a haunting self-portrait critiquing the art market's current demand for that same Black portraiture.

While Basel may seem to overpower local artists for attention, Chambers says it also presents undreamt-of career-making opportunities: "Whatever anyone says, Basel creates a place where curators from out of town can see a Miami artist's work and carry them from plan A to plan B, C, and D."

The arrival of Art Basel, he said, "was a stab of adrenaline that instigated a lot of effort," including the city's own public and private museums, nonprofit organizations like Oolite Arts and Locust Projects, and, not least, the creation of freshly minted homegrown collectors.

This Tuesday's opening of the Basel fair was certainly adrenaline-charged. Collectors poured in with masks off and wallets out. Part of that buying frenzy may have been abetted by a glitch in the digital passes provided to many V.I.P.s as they lined up in a well-heeled cattle chute at the fair's 11 a.m. start. The fair's phone app soon began crashing.

"You should've seen all these Type A personalities trying to figure out why their passes wouldn't work," chuckled Darlene Pérez, the wife of Jorge Pérez, one of Miami's most prominent real estate developers and art collectors (as well as the namesake of the Pérez Art Museum Miami, or PAMM, which was rechristened in his honor after a \$55 million donation of art and cash). For many, the thought that a rival might be beating them to a coveted artwork while they were stuck in line only seemed to heighten the tension.

But the Pérezes and their chief art advisers, their collection's director, Patricia Hanna, and its assistant curator and manager, Anelys Alvarez, made up for any lost time, racking up over a dozen purchases in the first few hours of the fair. Jorge Pérez moved from booth to booth like an art shark, stopping only to briefly greet old friends and artists before giving final approval on works put on hold before the fair — or bought outright — including an \$80,000 painting by Katherine Bradford at downtown Manhattan's Canada gallery and two \$50,000 photographs by Carrie Mae Weems at Berlin's Galerie Barbara Thumm.

But his advisers' mapped itinerary was continually sidetracked as Pérez dashed off to see new works that caught his eye. When deciding between three paintings by Ana Prata at Buenos Aires's Isla Flotante gallery, Pérez quickly pointed to each and announced which was No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3. He, his wife, and their advisers then all simultaneously threw fingers playground-style to indicate which piece they felt was the strongest.

One-Two-Three-Shoot!

In this case, everyone chose painting No. 3 — which would have made a nice companion to a previous Prata canvas that Pérez already owned and had hung in one of his Cancún, Mexico, condo towers. Alas, this new \$37,000 work was already sold and Pérez wasn't willing to settle for what he deemed second-best.

The quartet sped on and the entire process was repeated a few minutes later at Los Angeles's Rele gallery, which had four works by the Nigerian painter Tonia Nneji.

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Catching up with Pérez, he was asked if this kind of impulse purchasing ever led to a case of buyer's regret. "Twenty years later, sometimes you look at a piece and say" — he slapped his hand to his forehead in mock agony — "'What was I thinking?'" Thank god 90 percent of it all is good and only 10 percent bad." And the "bad" ones, do they find their way to an auction house?

"Never," Pérez replied firmly. Nothing is ever resold, he explained. What isn't hung inside one of his homes, or his El Espacio 23 open-to-the-public exhibition space, is placed inside one of his many condo developments or office buildings. And almost all of it is already bequeathed to PAMM.

Away from the Basel fray, a local artist, Clara Varas, reflected on the two starkly different versions of her hometown, each of whose inhabitants think of themselves as the "real" Miamians. "There's the Miami of luxury and then there's the other Miami, where I live." This week finds Varas with one foot planted in each world.

Varas seems primed to benefit from the fair's exposure. Spinello Projects, which represents her, is one of just four South Florida galleries included in this edition of Art Basel. She simultaneously has a solo show of her latest work at Dimensions Variable, an artist-run nonprofit space also on the itinerary of many visiting heavyweights.

She certainly doesn't argue with Chambers's take on Basel's transformative power. Growing up on Miami Beach, after arriving there in 1980 as a 7-year-old when her family left Cuba, has made her well aware of the fair's impact: "Now I see a lot more local artists being part of the conversation."

Yet it's an artistic discussion that can leave Varas feeling conflicted. Her installations, which she's called "expanded paintings," feature meaningful detritus scavenged from the city's streets and embedded into unstretched canvases whose fields of color evoke the abstractions of Sam Gilliam.

"I collect things from places where I live," Varas explained, which means spending municipal trash pick-up days scouting the curbs of immigrant-centered neighborhoods like her own current home of Allapattah. "It's my life. But it's not just my own life, it's the life of my neighbors, of my friends, of the people I've grown up with. Of everyone who has dealt with migration and displacement." With the city's affordable housing crisis showing little signs of slowing, Varas said, the resulting street pickings were, sadly, all too revealing.

"A lot of the stuff I find comes from apartment buildings where it seems a family had to take off in a hurry, or got evicted," she said. Yet the artwork into which Varas incorporates the found objects will likely end up — if a sale is successful — in a home whose daily concerns are quite distant from the ones that inspired it. "It's a very strange dynamic and it's not an easy one for any artist, especially if you're trying to make a living from your work."

It's only been in the last few years that Varas says she was able to return to artmaking and saw her work attract notice — a good two decades after graduating from New York's School of

Visual Arts, struggling to make rent in Brooklyn, and eventually returning to Miami. Living a life as a full-time artist now seems tantalizing close. Still, she had a more immediate problem, one caused by her raiding her own kitchen for items that mesh perfectly into her artwork. "I better go buy a new salad spinner right now," she quipped.