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The New York Times

An Art Fair Meets a Pent-Up Demand

This year's edition of Art Basel Miami Beach brings collectors back while welcoming a more diverse group of gallery owners.



By Ted Loos

Nov. 28, 2021



Part of the Miami Beach cityscape, reflected by the convention center where Art Basel will take place. Credit...Cliff Hawkins/Getty Images

Art Basel Miami Beach has twice been disrupted by seismic world events. In 2001, what was to be the inaugural edition of the art fair was postponed a whole year in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks. Last year, the coronavirus pandemic was the culprit, though the live fair was replaced with an online viewing room.

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In the intervening years, the fair became the linchpin of a booming Miami art scene and a larger cultural economy.

Now, as Art Basel returns to the Miami Beach Convention Center from Thursday through Saturday with 253 galleries from 36 countries and territories, it meets a pent-up demand — you could say that the supply chain for a certain kind of prestige fair has been unclogged.

“I think Miami is going to be crazy,” said the contemporary art collector Peter Kahng, a New York-based investor who has attended many times before and is planning to return, with his mother and a friend in tow.

Mr. Kahng — who is on the board of the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, alongside his parents, Maria and Stephen Kahng — recalled buying a photograph by Danh Vo at the fair several years ago from the gallery Kurimanzutto.

But he added that his attendance was not always about making purchases. “I go more for relationships and to survey the market,” Mr. Kahng said, noting that seeing the local collector-founded exhibition spaces was also a lure.

Marc Spiegler, the global director of Art Basel, said he also expected robust attendance this week.

“Americans were scarce on the ground at the fairs in Europe this fall,” he said, including his own fair in Basel, Switzerland, which took place in September. “And we expect them all to show up in Miami.”

As Mr. Kahng put it, referring to the Basel fair and to the October edition of Frieze London, “Everyone who didn’t go to either one is now regretting it. I keep hearing that.”

There are no major changes to the format of the fair this year.

“We didn’t think it was the time to reinvent the show,” Mr. Spiegler said, adding that one small adjustment was that the Meridians section, for large-scale projects, has moved from a convention center ballroom to the main show floor.

Behind the scenes, Art Basel’s director for the Americas, Noah Horowitz, left his job this year and has not yet been replaced; he had been in charge of the Miami Beach event.

Covid precautions at the fair include a requirement for a recent negative test, or visitors can provide proof of vaccination or recent recovery. There is also a mask mandate for everyone, one that Mr. Spiegler said would be enforced.

The topic is personal for Mr. Spiegler, who contracted a mild breakthrough case of Covid in October. But he said that the smooth implementation of the safety measures at the Basel fair in September convinced him that “we have the right approach.”

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“It taught us two things,” Mr. Spiegler said. “It’s possible to do a show the way we did it, with a high level of precaution. And it’s possible to sell art under those conditions.”

Forty-three of the galleries participating this year are joining the fair for the first time. The composition of those dealers has shifted, in part by design. Fair organizers relaxed some of the qualifications for dealers who apply to participate, including the length of time galleries have been operating; now, there is no minimum gallery age.

“We wanted to reflect society at large,” Mr. Spiegler said. “As a result of Black Lives Matter and other movements, there are new galleries opening run by people of color.”

The result, Mr. Spiegler said, is “a more diverse group of gallery owners than we have had in the past.”

He added, “It’s still not diverse enough, but we made real progress on this front.” He cited Afriart Gallery of Kampala, Uganda, as a debut of note.

Another new gallery to the fair, Pequod Co. of Mexico City, was founded by Mau Galguera and his wife, María García Sainz, in February 2020; they started with digital content and opened a physical space in June of that year.

“This is our first time at an international art fair, and an important moment for us,” Mr. Galguera said.

The gallery’s focus, he said, is on “the new generation of Mexican artists.” One member of that group, Paloma Contreras Lomas, is the subject of the gallery’s solo booth in the fair’s Positions sector.

The installation, made for the fair, uses several media, including video, sculpture and drawing. Ms. Contreras Lomas’s work, heavily influenced by comics, looks at “the play between science fiction and reality,” Mr. Galguera said.

The Detroit gallery Reyes | Finn, also making its debut in Art Basel, will devote its booth to a solo presentation of the artist Maya Stovall, who was featured in the 2017 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her featured neon works will include “A_____ That Defies Gravity, no. 40-49” (2021).

Bridget Finn, a co-founder of the gallery, said that in one of the series on view, highlighting crucial dates in history, Ms. Stovall addresses a current hot topic: critical race theory.

“There’s a lightness to the medium of neon, no pun intended,” Ms. Finn said. “That balances the seriousness of the topic, and I think that works for the context of this fair.”

For galleries that are showing multiple artists, the trick is to get the mix exactly right.

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“Fairs are a great opportunity to do a mash-up,” said the dealer Marianne Boesky, who has two locations in New York’s Chelsea district and who has taken part in most editions of the Miami Beach fair since it began.

Her booth will feature well-known art stars like Frank Stella and Jennifer Bartlett, but also emerging talents like Jammie Holmes and Michaela Yearwood-Dan.

“I like to have both emerging and established artists, to see the historical threads that tie them together,” Ms. Boesky said. “If the new work holds its own, it gets elevated. If the old work looks good, it feels fresh.”

At least three galleries showing at Art Basel — Goodman Gallery, Galerie Lelong & Co. and Mitchell-Innes & Nash — will be expanding beyond the confines of a booth. They are also opening seasonal pop-up spaces in Miami’s Design District, timed to open during fair week and extending into January.



“Untitled” (2006) by Eddie Martinez will be shown in a seasonal pop-up space during Art Basel Miami Beach. Credit...via Mitchell-Innes & Nash

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“Since Art Basel Miami Beach was canceled last year, we launched our seasonal Miami space so that we could maintain a foothold in the city,” Lucy Mitchell-Innes, a co-founder of Mitchell-Innes & Nash, said in an email of her 2020 effort. This year is the first time she has had seasonal space concurrent with a major fair.

Inside the convention center, the gallery will show a variety of works, including Jacoby Satterwhite’s “Skeptic’s Allegory” (2020).

The pop-up space features canvases by the New York-based painter Eddie Martinez, including “Untitled” (2006), as well as works by self-taught artists Mr. Martinez collects or is inspired by, including Ike Morgan and Billy White.

“I’m largely self-taught, so it made sense to pair them,” Mr. Martinez said of the show, which will have around 45 works in total.

Mr. Martinez will be in Miami for the pop-up show. As for attending the Art Basel fair itself, “We’ll see,” he said, before almost immediately relenting: “Of course I’ll go.”

He recalled some of the discoveries and unexpected juxtapositions from the art-filled hall in past years.

As Mr. Martinez put it, “It’s great to see things that come out of nowhere.”