

MIAMI BEACH



BY THE TIME ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH OPENED ITS doors on December 4, anticipation had swelled to hurricane strength. The festivities started the previous night, with mojitos and salsa music for fair VIPs at the freshly painted Shore Club, and had careered onward to the Miami Museum of Contemporary Art downtown, at a party celebrating the opening of several exhibitions. On that crazed Tuesday night, the anointed—and the wily crashers—wound up in Key Biscayne, at the home of Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz, stalwarts of Miami's Cuban expatriate community and world-class collectors. As the city skyline glittered across the bay, the de la Cruzes' home seemed overrun by contemporary art, with works by international stars Gabriel Orozco, Yoshitomo Nara, Ernesto Neto and Sarah Morris displayed in exquisite white marble spaces. "We tore down the children's rooms when they moved out to build exhibition spaces," said Carlos de la Cruz, "and we bought the house across the street for guests." Fueled by top-shelf food and drink, the party continued until almost 4 a.m.

In a sense, the art world had been waiting for that party for almost two years. The offspring of Art Basel, the Swiss contemporary art fair held every June, Art Basel Miami Beach had been announced in 2000, but its debut was scuppered in 2001 following the September 11 attacks. Now it was finally happening, and the dealers who had competed for the 160 booths in the Miami Beach Convention Center were as tense with expectation as the observers who wondered whether the upstart would unseat its well-established U.S. competitors. No surprise, then, that the battalions of art lovers descended on South Beach to buy, bronze and booze, and to bear witness to the birth of a fair.

But despite the white-garbed, bronzed Adonii and the improbably proportioned sirens flanking them on the red carpet, the opening itself was no Hollywood premiere. There was no fancy gala benefit, and unlike in Basel, where the "collectors' preview" means a buying frenzy, in Miami those first few hours were far more *tranquilo*.

Yes, a handful of galleries made a killing early on—London's Lisson did \$1 million in business in the first four hours, selling a giant purple glass ball by Anish Kapoor at \$375,000 and Julian



Opie stick-figure animations and a range of photo sets by Francis Alÿs, both for \$30,000. But Lisson was an exception. One German gallerist, for instance, wondered aloud if he and his colleagues had fallen victim to fair director Samuel Keller's contagious optimism. "I rehung my booth just after closing time," he said very late on opening night. "Tomorrow it will have a lot of brighter colors, because we need to appeal directly to the American crowd." (Indeed, one of the big selling points for the fair had been the expected presence of an untapped Latin American collector base, and many galleries spotlighted artists from the region, such as Brazilians Neto and Vik Muniz and Argentine Guillermo Kuitca.)

Another adjustment for Miami was dealers' price lists. "At [New York dealer Larry] Gagosian, where the numbers are usually known to be aggressive, the prices for once are actually in line with the market," noted one auction house heavy hitter. "He has a Warhol *Double Jackie* at \$600,000. That's a solid price, but in Basel it would be at \$850,000 to \$900,000. Or look at Jablonka Galerie [of Cologne] and its Warhol *Dollar Sign*. The one they had in Basel was \$750,000. Here, it's \$575,000."

Such dealer restraint proved well advised; high-end sales reportedly lagged behind that of midmarket works. Many major European collectors—especially among the British, French, German and Belgian—were nowhere to be seen, with the notable exception of Austria's Francesca von Habsburg, continuing a buying jag that started in October at Art Forum Berlin. And regardless of the bearers' nationality, many checkbooks seemed slow to open. "You could throw a stone from my booth without hitting a dealer who's sold anything," moaned one British dealer on the first full day of business.

Still, by the weekend (the fair ended Sunday, December 8), one was hard-pressed to find unhappy dealers. Among local collectors, the de la Cruzes did their civic duty, buying a Liam Gillick sculpture

from New York dealer Casey Kaplan, more Orozcos from blue-chip contemporary New York dealer Marian Goodman and a Jorge Pardo 30-foot tunnel sculpture from Galerie Neugerriemschneider of Berlin. Like many collectors at the fair, they took their time—reserving work before buying, refusing to sprint through the hall, looking at everything before making decisions.

Most people, after all, came for almost an entire week, from Tuesday through Sunday night—twice as long as they stay in Basel—and spent their (sometimes hungover) mornings touring the specially opened private collections of local titans such as real estate developer Martin Margulies and the Rubell family. "I think these open houses are a Miami phenomenon," explained Jason

Rubell, next-gen collector son of Donald and Mera Rubell. "This is a very open community, you know, where people walk around in G-strings all day." Which brings up another of the fair's particularities: the diversions offered both by the beaches and the terrace of the ever-hip Delano Hotel pool—distractions from buying that had gallerists doing a rain dance at 11:45 every morning.

Thus, in just a few days Art Basel Miami Beach asserted its own, dual personality. On one hand, its social pace was frenetic: The VIP schedule alone was a daunting document, 15 pages long and peppered with myriad and often conflicting events, sometimes separated by vast expanses of freeway. On the other hand, things inside the fair hall were markedly slow but steady. "I rehung the booth three times," says New York dealer Sean Kelly. "We covered our expenses before the fair opened, sold through-

out the vernissage and had three people working nonstop since then. By Friday, we were reduced to selling prints." His strongest sellers included German photographer Frank Thiel and Brazilian conceptual artist Iran do Espírito Santo.

Art Basel Miami Beach may spell trouble for its competitors. Most vulnerable is Art Miami, which ran January 9 through 13. More important, as one major European gallerist predicts, "If Miami Beach continues like this, the Armory Show [in New York] and Art Chicago could become more regional events." Sure, dealers complained about the local unions, everyone bemoaned the chaotic food service and the schedule left people frazzled or pleasantly buzzed. But where else would million-dollar grosses coexist with rap impresario P. Diddy hanging in the fair's evening VIP lounge or New York dealer Michele Maccarone selling in her bikini at "Art Positions" (where 20 galleries showed in converted shipping containers parked along the beach) or collectors paying with suitcases full of cash?

How priceless is the sight of London dealer Jay Jopling dining at Sultan's Mediterranean Cuisine pizza joint, a space no larger than a Tracey Emin tent? "This was my first trip to Miami and it's been a remarkable event," said video artist Candice Breitz, whose installation, shown by her dealer, Francesca Kaufmann of Milan, was a hit in the solo "Art Statements" section. "There's something truly humorous about having a chic Swiss fair in such a tacky city."

MARC SPIEGLER



At the inaugural Art Basel Miami Beach December 4 through 8, sales were slow but steady, and the frenetic social pace left people pleasantly buzzed. Clockwise from top left: Fair director Samuel Keller; the glittering city at night; a visitor at the fair's Cafe Basel; the 1977 Jean Dubuffet painting *Site agreste* at the booth of London's Waddington Galleries; and actress Elizabeth Berkley (left) and artist-actress Ahn Duong at a Miami Design District party.