



A place in the sun

When the organizers of Art Basel Miami Beach announced the event's debut three years ago, they set the bar high. Press releases predicted it would immediately rank as the outstanding fair of the Americas. Given that America already had two major contemporary art fairs – New York's Armory Show in winter and Art Chicago in spring – this was a pretty bold assertion. Then again, the Swiss are not known for their braggadocio. The debut edition went swimmingly: most galleries sold strongly, the social schedule was exhaustingly dense and many major Miami collectors opened their homes and warehouses to the art world. In the art market ecosystem – where the roster of fairs is bloated and the number of major collectors is limited – the introduction of such an imposing new player will have massive ripple effects.

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Why did the Swiss start an American fair?

A little history helps here. Since the mid-1990s, Art Basel has ranked undisputed as the world's most important art fair. But in the late 1980s, Basel was an also-ran, less important than Art Cologne and Art Chicago. Then the fair started targeting American collectors and galleries with VIP packages. Today, no fair rivals Basel's ability to deliver solo buyers and museum groups to galleries, who compete fiercely to participate. Even before the frenetic VIP opening, multimillionaire collectors are sneaking in like nightclub gatecrashers to poach work from dealers still installing their stands.

But, much as those American collectors might like eating at Chez Donati, they would happily skip the shipping, customs taxes and other hassles involved in transatlantic art buying. Which means that the only fair that could theoretically unseat Art Basel would have to take place in America. "In the 1980s, the European fairs were doing well," observes Sam Keller, director of Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach. "In the 1990s the US fairs went up and up. We saw there was a demand in the States for a major fair. And we knew if we didn't do it, someone else would."

Sometimes, as they say on the brutal fields of American football, the best defence is a great offence.



But why Miami Beach?

Because Miami asked. Years ago, when Keller was the fair's PR director, he and director Lorenzo Rudolf visited Miami and found themselves being lobbied, hard, by the town's myriad collectors to extend the Art Basel brand to Florida.

"These were very serious collectors who felt Miami was not taken seriously," Keller says. "They promised their full support, including their knowledge and their connections. They played a critical role in making it happen and in making it successful. During the fair, for example, the de la Cruzes had over 2,000 people visit their house and paid a \$100,000 catering bill to feed them. Dennis Scholl discovered some stranger in his home office checking email and didn't kick him out. That would never happen in another city."

As a rule, the Miami collectors came from elsewhere. The city's Latin American population were either escaping Castro's Cuba – like Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz – or seeking a safe haven to anchor their fortunes should things turn twitchy in, say, Venezuela, Brazil or Argentina. The Stockholm-style winters above the Mason-Dixon line, meanwhile, catalyze a southward surge from New York and Chicago every December. Tapping those fortunes – especially the Latin American money – was a driving factor in ABMB's creation, because it promised new buyers for an art world in which the Stateside and European bushes have already been vigorously beaten.



Isn't Miami a cultural desert?

Granted, one could hardly say that art runs through the fabric of the local discourse. The number of Miami-based galleries present in the ABMB fair hall is telling: four, out of 175. In its defence, Miami has some solid museums, who are pulling out all the stops for the fair – there's a Richard Artschwager retrospective at MoCA Miami, for instance – and even more collectors will open up their homes this year. That said, when it comes to art, Miami's hardly New York or London or Berlin.

But maybe that doesn't matter. The contemporary art world's most important fixture, after all, is the Venice Biennale, and that's hardly held in an avant-garde metropolis. Likewise Kassel, the site of the quinquennial Documenta, is a textbook backwater, even less interesting now that it's no longer on the border between East Germany and West Germany. As for placid Basel, it ranks well behind Zurich even on the Swiss art scene.

Depending on how you view art fairs, there's a lot to be said for the marooned-on-a-desert-island scenario. Turn the art world's jetset loose in a town like London and they'll sprint through a fair, then scamper off to studio visits, gallery tours and museum shows. In a more provincial place, those same glitterati meet on shuttle buses, at tiny dive-bar discos, and stand around looking lost on street corners. Bonding – and buying – ensues.

Is the Miami fair an Art Basel clone?

From an infrastructure standpoint, yes. In fact, this year Keller is even having the Swiss event's booth walls shipped to Miami. The fair has also replicated the role played by Basel's Kunsthalle bar: South Beach's Raleigh Hotel bar serves as the single after-dinner rendezvous, where you'll find heavy-hitters doing digestivos.

But in terms of the work found in the fair, Miami Beach is no doppelgänger. While Art Basel is a roughly equal mix of Moderns, postwar blue-chip and contemporary work, in Miami Beach there are only a handful of Moderns galleries, and younger work fills half the stands. In fact, ABMB has three sections designed to promote work by younger artists: Art Positions, housed in oceanfront shipping containers; the one-man shows in Art Statements; and a new section called Art Nova, where younger galleries will be limited to showing work created in the last two years.

Despite only representing a tenth of the fair, blue-chip dealers such as Waddington Galleries and Mitchell-Innes & Nash play a crucial role. "Being shown in the same space with Picasso, Warhol and Ruscha helps to validate younger artists," says Keller. "The older galleries also benefit, because it connects their programme with what's going on today. Look at Jan Krugier [the Geneva-based dealer in Picasso, Klee and Bacon]. He could do fairs where his work would be alongside Old Masters, but instead he chooses to come to Miami."



Will this shake up the US market?

The effect of ABMB was felt even before it opened. Art Chicago was pushed further to the sidelines of the international scene, while the Armory Show shifted dates from February to March, giving a chance for both gallery stock and collector budgets to recover from mojito-fuelled Miami Beach buying sprees.

In the long run, however, a scheduling clash with the Armory Show seems inevitable. Last year, ABMB staff circulated forms asking dealers to detail where they stayed and which restaurants they patronized, presumably as way to quantify the fair's financial impact. "They want the city to give them Art Miami's slot in January," reckons the director of one major London gallery. "If that happens it will become impossible to do both the Armory and Art Basel Miami Beach. You couldn't get enough high-quality work from your artists for two fairs just three months apart."

In that case, it's certain the Armory Show will suffer. "New York is an art fair every day," says Victor Gisler of Zurich's Mai 36 Galerie. "Already the Armory has become less international. If Art Basel Miami Beach moves to January, the Armory is dead." In part, the problem is that the Chelsea fair has not done much to build loyalty across the Atlantic. "We do great business at the Armory, but we'd love not to go there," says that same London gallery director. "In seven years I've never met the Armory staff during the fair; the Art Basel people are always stopping by and getting on their mobile phones to solve our problems. And the size of the Armory stands is a huge difference. Even the extra-large booths are too small for really big, important works."

So is the Armory done for?

Not definitely. After all, it's in Chelsea, epicentre of the global art market. "People will always go to New York, because if you don't, you feel like you're missing something," says voracious collector Mickey Cartin of Connecticut. That said, the fair will have to adapt. "I think if you're an established gallery you only need to do one major fair in Europe and one in the States," says Berlin gallerist Max Hetzler.

"For European dealers, Miami offers the advantage of being neutral ground. You're not competing with New York galleries on their home turf." Matthew Marks – the dynamo dealer behind the Armory Show – declined to offer any comment on the Armory's future. But it hardly takes a genius to spot the strategy. "Look at the list for the Armory Show this year versus in the past," says Kavi Gupta of Chicago's Vedanta Gallery. "They're bringing in younger and younger galleries to differentiate themselves from Art Basel."

In the long run, a more avant-garde Armory Show could complement ABMB rather than trying to be a direct competitor. (Just as the Frieze Art Fair could complement Art Basel in Europe.) And cutting-edge work fits perfectly in the Chelsea setting. "It's a very fast-paced show in terms of the selling, because those New York collectors are competing to beat each other, deciding very quickly whether to buy," says another Berlin gallerist, Matthias Arndt. "You can take bigger risks there because it's so close to the artists and galleries, and so many more people are coming. I sold normal pieces well in Miami Beach, for example, but not my major Thomas Hirschhorn installation."





Can all the other art fairs survive?

In the space of two months, we now have Art Forum Berlin, FIAC in Paris, London's Frieze Art Fair, Art Cologne, Artissima in Turin, Paris Photo and then ABMB. Certainly, it's impossible for so many fairs to be internationally prominent; there is neither the mass of high-end material, nor the collector base to buy it. International collectors will always descend in droves to a new fair; but the hard part comes in the following few years. The natural progression for any fair is to gradually become a more regional event, as prestigious galleries flit toward whatever new fair they think will next draw wealthy neophiliacs.

If the galleries guess wrong, it's disastrous. But even guessing right doesn't guarantee riches. "Art fairs are immensely cost-intensive – a gallery could do \$500,000 in sales and still not show a real profit after doing its sums," says Nicholas Logsdail of Lisson Gallery. "Not to mention the fact that some of your best people are working the booth instead of doing their job. It puts a premium on the works, and in the end collectors pay with higher prices. It also puts a huge financial pressure on smaller galleries, who risk money they cannot afford for the privilege of being there. Having said this, fairs create a great buzz and remain the most effective way of expanding the market for artists and galleries."

How will the fair of the future look?

The problem with too many of today's fairs is that they've become a sort of monoculture. "For people with a constant need to see new things, it's a shortcut to travelling all over the world," says Mickey Cartin. "But a few years ago, all the fairs started looking the same, like some sort of art shopping mall. There's this pretence that the fairs are forums for intellectual growth and information-gathering, but obviously fairs are market-driven."

The extracurricular programme at ABMB will be heavy again this year, including a launch party for Taschen's new Muhammad Ali book and a show curated by art-world It Boy Hans-Ulrich Obrist in the Design District. "The life cycle of fairs is getting shorter – the ones that survive will be those that have a cultural impact," Keller says. "The question people will ask is: Where do I get the most extra? That's why we try to make Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach into a platform for artists, critics and curators. It has to be fun: a good time in a beautiful place with interesting people. Because pleasure is an important thing in the art world."

*Art Basel Miami Beach, 4-7 Dec, Miami Convention Center,
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