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Art Is a Splash, Grand and Tiny, in Miami

By MELENA RYZIK DEC. 5, 2014



Credit Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

MIAMI — “My name is Richard, I’m from New York City, and I’m happy to be here in Art Basel Miami,” the singer Richard Kennedy, of the dance music act Hercules and Love Affair, announced into a mike late on Wednesday night, before launching into a spirited solo set for an eclectically dressed crowd, in a room surrounded by paintings.

Technically speaking, though, Mr. Kennedy was not at Art Basel Miami, the annual art and design showcase held in Miami Beach. He was seven miles away, at a thrift store in the Little Haiti neighborhood here, performing as part of an effort to connect a burgeoning community of local artists to the international jet set that descends in a buying frenzy each year.

“This is the largest art moment on the planet,” said Karla Ferguson, owner of the Yeelen Gallery, a 13,000-square-foot space that opened last year in Little Haiti. “We want our voices to be heard.”

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On Saturday she will host the second edition of Fade to Black, a party celebrating the work of African-American artists. Last year, it was in the Design District; this year, Ms. Ferguson hopes that holding it in her gallery will introduce out-of-towners to Little Haiti, which lately has seen an influx of artists priced out of the Design District and neighboring Wynwood.

After years of effort, “it’s time that Little Haiti is also recognized as being part of this immense art scene that we have in Miami,” Ms. Ferguson said. A hashtag, #ihaitibasel, was invented to promote the scene.

Over Basel’s 12 years here, the metastasizing business of showing and selling art has transformed this city and its waterfront environs into a weeklong Dionysian cultural playground.

“Imagine taking Cannes, a rock festival, a home and boat show, a whole lot of expensive art, and fashion week, and smashing them all together, and you’d be approaching Art Basel,” said the film director Baz Luhrmann, who knows spectacle (“Moulin Rouge!”).

On Wednesday, at the highly coveted V.I.P. preview at Art Basel, he sat in a friend’s booth, Galerie Gmurzynska, at the Miami Beach Convention Center, and watched as a 1918 Picasso, “Vénus et Amour,” got snapped up for \$1 million, after a bidding war that included the music mogul Sean Combs. “The level of fiesta is quite extraordinary,” Mr. Luhrmann said, as he was handed a glass of Champagne to celebrate.

(With attendance estimated at upward of 75,000 visitors, the spree ends on Sunday; the hangovers will probably last longer.)

And yet the two dozen selective companion fairs that have sprung up around the main Basel event, and the even more exclusive nightly bacchanals, on yachts and in strip clubs, still do not, somehow, cover all the cultural territory.

So a slew of alternative fairs and pop-ups have arrived to fill niches, especially those that do not cater to blue-chip artists, well-heeled buyers or the typical canon of work. Outside the big-tent atmosphere and away from the flashbulbs, experimental pieces, political themes and underrepresented populations can thrive.

“I get depressed when I come to the fairs, because it’s not about the experience” of engaging with art, said Cheryl Pope, a Chicago sculptor, installation and performance artist.

Ms. Pope discussed the idea of showing at the fairs with one of her galleries in Chicago, she said, but ultimately decided to present in an alternative, noncommercial exhibition called “Auto Body.” On Thursday she staged a performance piece, “Up Against,” in which she burst 700 water balloons, suspended from the ceiling, with her head.

“Nothing’s for sale here,” she said of the show, held in a former garage. “It’s making a statement.”

Ms. Pope, 34, an art lecturer and for many years a studio manager for the Chicago artist Nick Cave, added that she wasn’t against making money from her work. But, she said, “we need to steer our careers and guide the art,” to make sure it’s not driven by the marketplace “because the majority of us are not in it for that reason.”

“Auto Body,” organized with the rising young gallerist [Anthony Spinello](#), was also notable for its artists: 33 women, chosen by an international panel of female curators and museum directors. Mr. Spinello said

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it came together in part because he was doing some soul-searching about why, of his own roster of 11 artists, only three were women.

The pieces were mostly videos, many engaged with physicality: Antonia Wright, a Miami artist, hurled her naked body, seemingly painlessly, through glass; Tameka Norris, from New Orleans, glued her lips shut, tearing up as she tried to unstick them.

The exhibition travels to Buenos Aires next.

Among its curatorial committee was Ximena Caminos, wife of the Argentine developer Alan Faena. Tall, bald and dressed in his trademark white Mr. Faena was a big presence this week, celebrating the development of the Faena District, a six-block parcel of waterfront property to include luxury residences, a hotel (with design input by Mr. Luhrmann and his wife, the Oscar-winning costumer Catherine Martin) and a cultural center, Faena Forum, designed by Rem Koolhaas.

On Wednesday evening, Mr. Faena, wearing a white top hat, and Ms. Caminos, in an oxblood gown, presided over a party at the future home of their center. Guests including Jeffrey Deitch, Bruce Weber, Tommy Hilfiger and the Miami Beach mayor Philip Levine snacked on empanadas while chefs tended to a tower of grilling meat.

Mr. Faena's introduction was preceded by a brass ensemble's performance of "Fanfare for the Common Man" (cue Mr. Luhrmann: "It should be 'fanfare for the uncommon man'").

Mr. Faena, who had a similar project in Buenos Aires, says his new curvilinear center is expected to be open here in time for next year's Art Basel, but he was already thinking longer-term, saying, "Imagine 100 years from now, this amazing cylinder — people will say, how did this arrive here?"

A few blocks away, around the pool at the bohemian Freehand Hotel, a woman in a white sci-fi jumpsuit held what appeared to be a light saber to the water, guiding a swimmer in a conical cap. It was a performance courtesy of NEWD, a new art showcase based in Bushwick, Brooklyn, which organized it with UOVO Fine Art Storage and the galleries metro pcs (from Los Angeles) and Signal (Bushwick).

Rather than be treated like "fair No. 30 on a long list," the idea was do something with a house party vibe, said Kate Bryan, a co-founder of NEWD. Noah Horowitz, executive director of the Armory show in New York, stopped by and pronounced it "supercool."

"It's a noisy market, and I think they're smart not to set up another satellite fair," he said. "To do this, for me, is like super-refreshing."

Other alternative fairs, like Prizm, for African diaspora and emerging-market artists, in its second year, hope to move toward the mainstream.

"I'd like us to be as important as Basel, as important as Scope," said Mikhaile Solomon, a founder of Prizm.

Ms. Solomon, a Miami native who aims to include local artists, added that she founded the fair "to be socially impactful," with a political message. "It makes the work more relevant, and more collectible," she said.

Still, there was room to carouse.

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Guests at Prizm's opening, at the Miami Center for Architecture and Design downtown on Thursday evening, mingled while a D.J. played new and old school hip-hop. Across town, fried conch and dancing were on the agenda at the Little Haiti Cultural Center, to help inaugurate the Art Beat series, and on Wednesday, the thrift store gig ended with a Haitian rara band, marching through the quiet streets at midnight, trailing whirling revelers.