



Art Hits the Beach

During Art Basel weekend there's enough art and alternative festivals to overwhelm even the most dedicated connoisseur

by Libby Boren McMillan

If you love having your mind expanded and your visual senses aroused to the point of intoxication, make plans now to attend the seventh annual Art Basel Miami Beach (ABMB) this December 4-7. Sister event to the original—which still occurs in Basel, Switzerland—ABMB showcases the world's best modern and contemporary art.

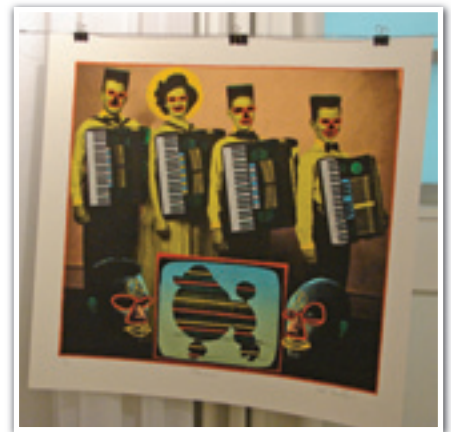
Last year forty-three thousand visitors attended the electrifying four-day extravaganza, considered the United States' most prestigious international art event. Hotel rooms book up to a year in advance. Art Basel is invigorating, exciting, and thoroughly addictive; visit once and you'll likely be hooked yourself.

In addition to the works at the Miami Beach Convention Center by a bevy of internationally renowned dealers, Art Basel also proffers an enticing assemblage of additional relevant events. Live performances, special exhibitions, panel discussions, and crossover events featuring film, architecture, and music fill the weekend schedule; catch what you can,

and don't regret what you miss. You simply can't see it all.

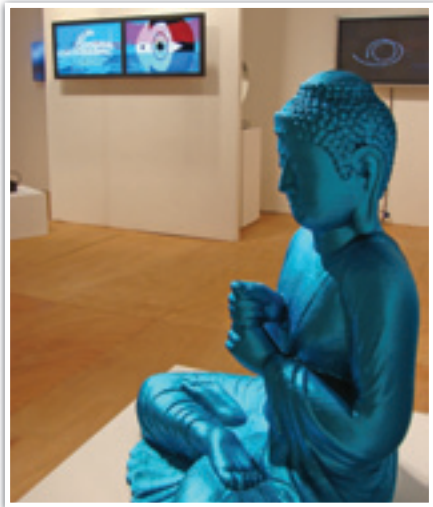
As if ABMB's jam-packed schedule didn't present more than enough to occupy a person who appreciates or collects art, Art Basel weekend has perpetrated an explosion of other art fairs that sagaciously occur on the same weekend, including SCOPE, Flow, Bridge, Red Dot, and more. They span venues across the city, from the Wynwood Design District to SoBe. Watch the *New York Times* or *Miami Herald* for helpful maps and lists prior to arriving on the east coast; visiting multiple shows does require some planning and a good navigator in the car.

No matter your motivation for attending any of the events on art fair weekend, you'll notice a wide variety of fellow patrons. Art Basel attracts art lovers ranging from art school students to hedge fund buyers. International collectors groups and museum buyers at the 2007 show came from sixteen countries, including New Zealand, Russia, India, and Taiwan. The people-watching



ABMA's gallery (top) can be visually overwhelming. (Above) This Bridge fair print is by an artist who trained under Jeff Koons.

is just as fascinating as the product at Art Basel; buyers run the gamut, from young couples looking to make an investment, to boards-of-trustees from the Guggenheim, MOCA in Chicago, D.C.'s Hirshhorn, and nearly one hundred other museums from around the world. Competition for the best pieces is fierce, and serious buyers start lining up at the Convention Center on the first



SCOPE's blue-sequined Buddha (above), and a two-legged chihuahua and a bench made from toilet tank lids at ABMA (bottom).

morning. Where else could a person traverse the globe's finest galleries on foot, all in the space of two days?

Fair warning: The Convention Center is so large, many of the artists so well-known, and the quantity of art so abundant that Art Basel can be overwhelming. Peripheral vision becomes your enemy until you tame the urge to swivel and diverge—not an easy task, despite what appears, on paper, to be a sensible aisle-

by-aisle layout. Vital to enjoying the experience is a good set of walking shoes (and plenty of rest the night before if you plan to see as much as possible). Of course, a nice bank balance also comes in handy, as you're sure to be tempted somewhere along the way.

One of the first things you might notice is how everyone at ABMB seems to be on a cell phone or computer. Throughout the Convention Center, buyers and dealers are conversing long-distance or firing off e-mails with haste: hashing out prices and offers, artist comparisons, risks and rewards, gut instincts, competition, and more.

The most commonly heard word floating about is "thousands." You may never again hear it spoken aloud so many times in the span of a few short hours. The price range at Art Basel starts in the low four figures and caps out in the lower stratosphere. Nothing says "possibility" to a buyer more than a great work by an emerging artist, represented by a dealer well-established enough to make the cut. The very fact that a piece has been shown at Art Basel is a testament to its cachet. Last year, ABMB's two hundred galleries were selected from over 850 applicants and represented thirty countries and over two thousand artists.



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SCOPE is one of the more fun alternative fairs as demonstrated by this outdoor exhibit (top) and textile sculpture (below).

An ultra-cool central lounge area—a sea of white leather—offers respite in the heart of the Convention Center. Here fair-goers renew their energy with food and drink while still being able to eye the action at the gallery spaces on the aisle. It's not at all unusual to see a bottle of Veuve Clicquot uncorked in celebration of a purchase. Dress ranges from student grunge to Park Avenue and absolutely

few renowned galleries to be included in this small fair.

While Art Basel is a must-see, many find that these smaller fairs—held primarily in boutique-size Ocean Avenue hotels—are much more approachable, less exhausting, and give buyers more time to speak with gallery representatives. Despite the smaller size of the alternative fairs, the quality of artwork found there is still enormously high. Bridge Fair founder Michael Workman traverses the globe approximately two hundred days a year, visiting galleries to see if their stable of artists fits his vision for Bridge. The result is room after room of fierce art.

Bridge's 2007 location, on two floors of Miami Beach's Catalina Hotel, surprised in more ways than one. Each dealer had dealt with the hotel room's furniture in his or her own way: Some had removed it entirely, while others had creatively incorporated it into their exhibition, further blending art and design.

Flow's location, in the adjacent hotel, forced galleries to deal with an unusual aesthetic challenge: One wall in each room was covered in highly detailed brown-and-turquoise wallpaper. Each Flow gallerist had flown in prior to the event, to assess his or her space. With élan, each pulled off a unique twist on bold art plus bold room.

Art Positions is the name given to a collection of shipping containers placed directly on the beach and converted to public art spaces for twenty young gal-



everything in between.

Near the Convention Center are several of the other adjunct fairs, such as Bridge, Flow, and Red Dot. Each has its own philosophy: Bridge and Flow are for emerging artists at a price point affordable to anyone. The cleverly named Red Dot fair introduces a panoply of styles in its small but respected collective; expect a

leries. Art Video Lounge, Art Projects, Art Perform, and Art Sound Lounge enhance the list of optional exhibitions. For most people, after a third full day of looking, one's brain starts to overload and even the simplest task can become burdensome. Processing all the visual information takes a lot of mental energy.

Art at the smaller fairs like Bridge and Flow is generally more affordable than that at Art Basel, but quality and collectability are very much in evidence. SCOPE may be the most fun of all the alternative fairs, really pushing the envelope with a wink to those who attend. Held on the mainland in a small park, SCOPE's synthesis of exhibits, film, and performance art projects is easy to enjoy and packs plenty of fun surprises. It's actually a great place to start the weekend, before becoming immersed in Miami Beach.

Miami Art Fair Weekend is one enormous celebration of art, easily justifying the travel to get there, the higher-than-normal hotel rates, and the logistics. Of course, beyond securing a hotel room, you don't *have* to plan: just point yourself in the general direction and let the weekend unfold. If you love art, you'll love December's Art Basel weekend in Miami. 🐘

Libby Boren McMillan is a freelance writer for Times of the Islands.

FOR MORE INFORMATION



Art Basel Miami Beach

Dec. 4-7, 2008, www.artbaselmiami.com

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