

Miami, City of Sun and Beaches, Is Now About Art

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MIAMI — This city has worn many tags through the decades: It has been a place to honeymoon and retire, to buy cocaine and dodge bullets, to sample Little Havana and party all night. But art was never high on the to-do list.

Then, in 2002, Art Basel made Miami Beach its American home, bringing with it an international circus of high-powered art dealers, collectors, curators, critics and art lovers. Lasting less than a week a year, this high-wattage art fair, one of the biggest in the world, has nevertheless infused the booming contemporary-art scene here with an unmistakable swagger.

“Art Basel gave Miami the power to believe in itself, and that’s always a problem with regional art places,” said Mera Rubell, a Miami collector who, along with her husband, Don, owns the Rubell Family Collection. “The impact that it has all year round is really quite profound.”

Art Basel’s imprint has little to do, at this point, with a local gallery or artist’s ability to get through the fair’s famously rigorous vetting process. Just 3 of the 260 galleries invited this year are from Miami, and only a handful of homegrown artists are showing in the fair, which begins on Thursday.

But since Art Basel’s debut 10 years ago, dozens of new galleries have opened, and scores of artists have relocated here, lured by the relatively low rents and, partly, by Art Basel itself. The fair gives artists, collectors and gallery owners a rare opportunity to see world-class art but, more important, to hobnob with the leading players of the international art world.

The sculptor and video artist Christy Gast said she moved here in 2008 partly because the yearly art spectacle made the city seem like one of the rare places an artist could succeed.

“From the outside, Basel has created the perception that Miami is a city where being an artist is a viable thing to do,” said Ms. Gast, who teaches sculpture at the New World School of the Arts in downtown Miami.

The city, for its part, has used Art Basel to show the world that it is no cultural backwater, with museums, galleries and private collections all putting on their most ambitious shows of the year in time for the fair.

While many of the fair’s players stay close to the convention center, where most of the art is displayed, a sizable number wander to check out local works and the private collections in neighborhoods across Biscayne Bay.

Most galleries are clustered in two once-impoverished neighborhoods just north of downtown Miami that now serve as popular art enclaves, luring the expert and the curious alike. Three major developers, among them Tony Goldman and Craig Robins, have been scooping up properties in these areas over the past 15 years, with an eye toward artists and designers.

First came the Design District, known foremost for its furniture and design showcases, and then Wynwood Art District, its still-gentrifying neighbor, which has grown from about 4 galleries eight years ago to about 45 today. The two districts will host various satellite art fairs during the week of Art Basel, several of which are major draws in their own right.

Recently some of Miami's private collectors — Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz, Martin Z. Margulies, the Rubells and Debra and Dennis Scholl — solidified the neighborhoods' bona fides by moving much of their art there.

These collectors were also instrumental in bringing Art Basel to Miami Beach, recognizing that it could catapult Miami from a marginal regional art city to a maturing one.

“If you are here for a week and you love the visual arts, you can't help have some of Miami rub off on you with a great group of working artists,” said Mr. Scholl, who is also the vice president for the Knight Foundation's arts program. “The white-hot light of Art Basel doesn't just shine on the art fair.”

Along with galleries and artists, Miami's stock of private art collectors — many of whom house their collections in museumlike buildings — has also risen in the last decade.

There are now about three dozen people here who each quietly buy as many as a dozen major pieces a year.

“Ten or 15 years ago, you would go around, and people would have decorator art on their walls,” said Mr. Robins, the developer who also spearheads Design Miami, an influential fair that runs alongside Art Basel. “So many more people have real art nowadays.”

While some say Art Basel has not done enough for local talent, there is a sprinkling of exceptions: Hernan Bas, who grew up in the area, and Daniel Arsham, who fostered his career here, are two artists who have caught the attention of top-tier galleries in New York and Paris.

As Miami's cultural profile has grown, so too has the government's willingness to invest. Local museums, including the well-respected Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, are expanding, partly with government money. The Miami Art Museum is in the midst of constructing a new building designed by Herzog & de Meuron, the architects who reimagined the Tate Modern in London.

Despite the growth of the art scene, collectors and gallery owners say the city must continue to capitalize on the fair's power by reaching beyond what is hip and trendy to what is lasting.

Although galleries have proliferated, they can be scattershot in their approach, and the quality of the work can be inconsistent, art experts said. The highest-profile examples still have a hard time succeeding. Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, a Paris-based contemporary-art gallery, opened a branch in Wynwood in 2005 only to close it in 2009.

“That’s a problem for us,” said Fredric Snitzer, a member of the Art Basel selection committee and the owner of the Fredric Snitzer Gallery. “Still,” he added, “there remains an expectation from the outside that there can be a really viable gallery presence in Miami year-round.”

Mrs. de la Cruz, who moved much of her world-class contemporary art from her home to the de la Cruz Collection in the Design District in 2009, said Miami universities needed to create graduate programs that would act as springboards for talented young artists. She has worked with the Knight Foundation to finance study trips to Europe and New York to increase the students’ exposure to art outside Miami.

The city’s museums must also begin acquiring permanent collections; some collectors here would prefer to see the museums invest in art, not architecture. Miami is also devoid of full-time art critics.

“Art Basel has been wonderful to Miami, but for the rest of the year we need to start building an infrastructure,” Mrs. de la Cruz said. “We have to be very conscious of that, and we have to work very hard.”