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Art Basel Miami Beach 2009 at the Miami Beach Convention Center



Salvador Dali's *Homage a Marcel Duchamp* at Francis Naumann Fine Art



Kris Martin's *Lost* at Art Basel Miami Beach

LOST IN MIAMI

by Ben Davis

It's easy to get lost in Miami during the fairs. And this in a double sense. The main fair, **Art Basel Miami Beach**, Dec. 2-6, was particularly confounding this year, as it had spread like the evil hedge maze from *The Shining* to fill the entirety of the cavernous Miami Beach Convention Center.

At one point, I ran into art journalist **Alexandra Peers** at ABMB. "How'd they lay this thing out?" she said. "You always end up on 'F' aisle!" I think "You always end up on 'F' aisle" is a pretty good slogan for the whole experience.

But in addition to losing your way, it's also easy to lose your sense of meaning amid the razzle-dazzle, beneath drumbeat of the omnipresent, relentless question, "How are sales?" It's easy to forget that in addition to being a commercial affair, there is actually something interesting about this whole exercise in "*laissez-faire* curating" (as it has been called). Beneath it all, some good art is clawing for oxygen and nutrients in the crazy art-fair petri dish.

Here, in no particular order, are some things that were worth noticing during Miami fair week 2009:

Chess

Why was chess everywhere at the fair this year? Maybe it has something to do with a reach for some kind of mythologized intellectual authority. At any rate, the first thing that really stopped me at Art Basel was the booth of **Francis Naumann Fine Art**, the scholarly New York redoubt. There, packed lovingly into two stalls was a terrific, compact mini-exhibition, "Marcel Duchamp and the Art of Chess." Included were a **Salvador Dali** chess set, *Homage a Duchamp*, for which the pieces were cast from thumbs; **Yoko Ono's** all-white board (an anti-war statement, but also one with unintended racial undertones?); some amazing photos of a serious-looking Duchamp playing chess; great **Philippe Halsman** photos of art figures dressed up in Surrealist chess costumes; and too much more to list.

Chess was also the raw material for another, more improvised highlight. Smack dab in the middle of the Convention Center, one came upon the bafflingly empty booth of **Christian Hays**, the New York dealer who failed to show up, for reasons as yet unexplained. Neighbors **Sies + Hoeke** took the opportunity to set up a **Kris Martin** piece in the abandoned space, consisting of chess pieces arrayed against each other on the empty floor, sans board and so without direction. "Like refugees," the man from Sies + Hoeke told me. The piece had a lovely off-handedness to it, and certainly reflected the thesis that the most affecting pieces at art fairs are those that find their place in the interstices of the spectacle. It was, in fact, titled *Lost*.

Clubhouses

The masterminds of these fairs never fail to invoke the word "community" when introducing them -- it's all about "supporting the



Camper Contemporary, on the street outside the Aqua Art Fair



The "Art Burn 2009" in the Wynwood Gallery District



The Aqua Art Fair



Mike Shine's Art Shack at White Walls

art community," "the community of dealers," and so on -- while studiously avoiding mentioning that they are, in fact, about selling things. The fragmentary experience of fairland naturally creates a hunger for some kind of authentic esthetic communion.

Correspondingly, the weekend was full of tribal gatherings and clubhouses, whether in the form of **Camper Contemporary**, the Baltimore art space/camper that was seen in front of various fairs, or in the "Art Burn," the cookout spearheaded by the artist **El Celso**, which brought together an ephemeral group to toss some art on a BBQ, a kind of jovial ritual sacrifice to the Miami art gods.

At the **Aqua** fair, San Francisco's **White Walls** gallery dominated with an installation recreating the "art shack" of graffiti artist **Mike Shine**, a real space that exists in Briones, Ca., a low-key Mecca for fans of the SF graffiti scene. With lots of cool, cartoony illustration on wood, free-associative mythological themes and a wolfman deposited on the roof, the White Walls piece seemed teleported in from another, cooler world (San Francisco's **Museum of Craft and Folk Art** has also hosted a recreated version of the "Art Shack"). Later, wandering to the back of the **Design Miami** fair, I found myself enjoying a raggedy clubhouse where artists **Jim Drain** and **Graham Hudson**, and poet **P. Scott Cunningham** held court for the duration of the fair, turning out zines. Their castaway esthetic looked particularly good against the background of Design Miami's sculpted slickness.

The most rewarded outing for the clubhouse theme, however, came at **Pulse's** Ice Palace Studios, where the Austin art group **Okay Mountain's** contribution to the fair's "Impulse" section (sponsored by **Arthouse**) saw their nine-person team conjure an entire fake convenience store, stocked with artist-made products, from handmade condoms to a dummy wooden video poker machine. All items were actually on sale -- a candy bar made out of painted wood set you back as little as \$5.99. Okay Mountain's members themselves manned the store, serving as credible versions of bored store clerks.

It's not the most original gesture in the world; in fact, it's almost identical to one Chinese artist **Xu Zhen** did for **ShanghArt** at Art Basel Miami Beach a few years ago. But Xu was selling empty packaging, a comment on the hollowness of commerce, while the great thing about Okay Mountain's piece was the fun they clearly had making each of the individual items, injecting them all with a bit of slacker humor. It was all about finding a bit of soul amid the clutter of commodity exchange. No surprise, then, that Okay Mountain installation was a crowd-pleaser -- it won both the judged "Pulse Prize" and a separate "People's Choice" award.

Skulls

Signs of death were everywhere, though of a generally unthreatening kind. In the skull, you have an image that has art-historical cachet, and also has a certain trendy contemporary pop-Goth resonance. In 2009, its popularity also comes across as a bit of knowing black humor about the grim times we live in, a winking way to recognize -- and then forget -- the obscenity of all this money against the background of 10 percent unemployment. **Yan Pei-Ming's** flashy black and gray image of a skull overlaying a giant dollar bill at **David Zwirner**, which greeted visitors as they entered the Convention Center for Art Basel Miami Beach, brought together all of these senses in one place.

Best Skull award, however, goes to a large work by the Argentine group **Mondongo** at Buenos Aires' **Ruth Benzacar Gallery**, also at the main fair. It was formed out of thousands of tiny, detailed plasticine figures, coming together only from a distance into a skull, like an Impressionist painting. Up close, you wandered across an



Workshop Workshop, installation by Jim Drain, Graham Hudson and P. Scott Cunningham for Design Miami



Outside the Pulse Art Fair



Okay Mountain at work, at Pulse



endless landscape of tiny portrait heads, presenting scenes from art history (the couple from Manet's *Luncheon in the Grass*; a sectioned cow a la Hirst), cartoon characters (Simpsons, Smurfs, Muppets), and historical figures (Peron, Marx, Noriega) all swirled together, and too numerous to catalogue. You could stare at it forever, and almost forget that the face of death was hovering over you.

Strange Transmissions

At **Art Asia**, I was arrested by the spectacle of small children happily entertained by Taiwanese artist **Tseng Wei-Hao's** installation *Speaker Tree*. A "conductive ink" wall mural that resembled a sort of scribbled version of a bamboo garden, the project caused screeching, R2D2 noises to be broadcast every time a visitor formed a circuit between two of the lines on the wall. Moving your hands up and down the lines caused the bleeps and blurps to move up and down in pitch, to cacophonous effect. The artist himself was on hand to play with the kids, who seemed to love it -- though I didn't envy his neighbors who had to put up with the ruckus.

Less invasive was a piece at the **NADA** fair (which looked outstanding in its new headquarters at the Deauville Hotel, by the way), where **Twenty Twenty Art Projects** was playing host to a work by the up-and-coming Miami artist **Nicolas Lobo**. The work involved broadcasting the contents of a telephone chat room live on former pirate radio station 89.5 for the fair's duration -- "there's some guy on there, ranting and raving about his life," dealer **Scott Murray** told me when I passed by -- and visitors could call in if they wanted to be part of the piece, which would ultimately take the form of a record to be sold in an edition of 1,000. I liked the statement of installing a pirate radio station beneath the chandeliers of the Deauville, even if I can't imagine possibly wanting to listen to it. Murray's gallery, which was at NADA because of a grant from the **Knight Foundation**, has an interesting program; you should check it out.

Survivors

One of the indisputable virtues of the mega-fairs is that they unite a cross-section of the international art world all in one place, so that you can take its temperature. Some of my most interesting conversations at the fair were with **Vladimir Ovcharenko**, dealer from Russia's **Regina** gallery -- he expressed the suspicion that the current regime's machinations had set back the market for Russian contemporary art by making Russia politically uncool -- and, over at NADA, with New York-based Turkish artist **Burak Arıkan** at Istanbul's **NON Gallery**, who was showing visitors the booth's promising crop of Turkish artists himself, after NON's dealer was turned back by Homeland Security.

But don't count Iceland out of the game yet! Though humbled by last year's economic tsunami, the island nation's fine artists carry on with characteristic quirky perseverance. One of the most purely enjoyable pieces at Art Basel was the installation by impossible-to-pronounce Icelandic artist **Egill Sæbjörnsson** at Reykjavic's **i8** gallery. A fun play with virtual and actual space, the piece consisted of a series of boxes stacked in a corner, overlaid with video projection, thanks to which it appeared that phantom cubes were peeling off from the real versions and flying around the booth, or that lids on the cubes were popping open, ejecting the odd flying banana. Little solenoids in the boxes issued satisfying clacks as the virtual boxes snapped open and closed, or reunited with their flying doubles. It was like watching Minimalism haunted by the joy of invention it left behind.

Another Art Basel highlight was at **The Third Line** gallery, from Dubai, which was showing a set of mirrored reliefs by **Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian**. Each of these elegant works represents an invented hieroglyphic, playing on the esoteric aspects

On sale for \$5.99 at Okay Mountain



Yan Pei-Ming work at David Zwirner



Mondongo work at Ruth Benzacar Gallery



Detail of Mondongo work at Ruth Benzacar Gallery

of geometry. Each stands for a number, indicated by the number of points the figure would touch if a circle were to be traced around it; thus, a triangular figure represents the number 3, while a complex, eleven-pointed zigzagging figure represents the "hendecagon," or the number 11. When asked if the recent, much-publicized problems in Dubai had been a topic of discussion with visitors to the booth, the dealer rolled her eyes: "Everyone asks us, 'why is Dubai ruining the world?'"

Fortunately, Farmanfarmanian is the perfect antidote to such talk; the Iranian artist is 86, and as such something of a symbol of artistic longevity (the Third Line kept a copy of her autobiography, *A Mirror Garden*, on the desk to drive home the point for doubters).

Politics

Perhaps the most interesting development of the fair weekend was the coronation of New York artist **William Powhida** as the anti-Koons, in a lengthy *New York Times* article that saw reporter **Damien Cave** follow the artist, known for works sending up the art world, on his trip through the Convention Center. The article certainly won me over into the pro-Powhida camp, though on reflection this has much to do with its abbreviated autobiographical details -- the guy teaches art at Brooklyn public schools, which makes him a world-class badass in my book.

In both Powhida's case, and in the case of the weekend's other men-of-the-hour, the **Bruce High Quality Foundation**, success seems to have to do with some kind of ambient hunger for real social substance amid the sugar of the commercial art world. This dissatisfaction then gets channeled into jokes about the art scene's excesses. At Pulse, Powhida was showing a series of cartoons at **Schroeder Romero**, mocking art stardom; Bruce High Quality sold a pile of penises and noses, *Sack of Rome*, at NADA's **Y Gallery**, a joke on the trophy-hunting mindset (purchased by **Beth Rudin DeWoody**).

Over in Miami, it was the show at the private **Rubell Collection** that made me think again about the meaning of this zeitgeist. The exhibition was all self-referential self-congratulation, all name-brands and art-about-art, from **Bert Rodriguez's** mocking take on **Bruce Nauman** -- a neon spiral proclaiming "The True Artist Makes Useless Shit for Rich People to Buy" -- to **Elmgreen & Dragset's** stack of art shipping boxes with wrecked versions of Koons and Hirst works spilling out of them, a supposed joke on the art market crash. Upstairs at the Rubells were sober **Barbara Krugers** and **Louise Lawler's**. The next time some fool academic tries to argue that Lawler "critiques the codes and conventions of art display" in some anti-capitalist way, just think of the Rubells showing off her photos of their trophies as a trophy.

At any rate, that exhibition made me think that what is really lacking is definitely not ironic commentary on the art world, but some kind of meaningful attachment to the real, non-art world. Maybe Powhida's next series will be about the state of the public schools.

In the end, though, there is no ultimate guarantee that even serious content can serve as a firewall against cooptation. Without a doubt, the works that stay with me the most are the amazing photos on view at the **Margulies Collection** warehouse space. It was a wildly eclectic show, though it contained a lot of the same product as the collections of the other Miami barons (a **Jason Rhoades** much like the Jason Rhoades at the Rubells; a **Bill Viola** video that was the same as the Bill Viola video showcased at the **Cisneros Fontanals** collection; etc.). Special attention, however, was lavished on Marty Margulies' deep photography holdings, starting with one entire wall devoted to works by **Dorothea Lange**, **Walker Evans** and the FSA



Tseng Wei-Hao's with his installation, *Speaker Tree*, at Art Asia



The NADA art fair at the Deauville Hotel



Dealer Scott Murray of Twenty Twenty Projects



Artist Burak Arikan, with his paintings, at NON Gallery



Egill Sæbjörnsson installation at i8

gang from the 1930s. There is something odd about showing such works as decontextualized trophies, a fact tacitly acknowledged by the way that these photos, unlike the racy, baffling contemporary art works on view, were accompanied by paragraph-long didactic texts, to ground them in some sense of reality. I spent a long while in front of a grid of **Danny Lyon**'s 1968 images of Texas prison life, moved by their mixture sobriety and empathy.

Bubbles

If you had to ask me the best thing I saw in Miami. . . I would say that it was the close-up magic of the amazing **Mark Mitton**, world-class magician who had been flown in from NYC to perform at some special events for the weekend! Seriously, if you ever get a chance, go see Mark Mitton. Very few artists are as good at their craft as Mark is at what he does. He has some interesting things to say about art too.

If you asked me to pick an actual piece of *art*, I would have to go with a project that I stumbled upon, by chance, in the garden café across from the Convention Center. In the botanical gardens, an artwork had been set up for ABMB in a small alcove by Brazil's **Galeria Nara Roesler**. The work, by **Cao Guimarães** (b. 1965) is titled *Nanophany*. Run on a three-minute loop, it consists of fleeting clips of soap bubbles, each one captured pretty much at the instant of its bursting, as it collapses in on itself. These images alternate with close-ups of flies, at the instant that they take off and dart out of the frame. An esthetic woven of minute, almost subliminal observations, it was perfect for the art fairs, where you have to uncover treasures hidden in corners and in unexpected places.

And finally, speaking of bubbles bursting. . . As the big fair closed up shop Sunday night, the dealers tallied their successes, the Miami crowds filed out, and I headed out towards the beach to clear my head. There I stumbled, by happy coincidence, on **Karmelo Bermejo**'s closing night performance, *The Grand Finale*. A handful of people waited in the darkness, with the waves moving in the background. The artist pattered around in the darkness, as the crowd became restless. At last, the stunt came off, a fuse was lit, and enormous letters reading "RECESSION" caught fire, burning briefly, and then quickly fizzling out, to scattered cheers on the beach.

It was hard to know what exactly people were cheering; the spirit was neither critique nor celebration, but some undecided other thing. Bermejo's piece captured a mood of the fairs in 2009, strung out between empty spectacle and an easy cynicism, but with sparks of ambiguous profundity snatched from in between.

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Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian
works at The Third Line



William Powhida work at Shroeder
Romero



Bruce High Quality Collective's *The Sack
of Rome*, at Y Gallery



Bert Rodriguez work at the Rubell Collection



Louise Lawler at the Rubell Collection



The Margulies Collection at the Warehouse



Danny Lyon photographs at the Margulies Collection



Cao Guimarães' *Nanophany*, on view as part of Art Basel Miami Beach



Karmelo Bermejo's *The Grand Finale*