



Print Article



The Cartier Dôme in front of the Miami Beach Convention Center, during Art Basel Miami Beach



Reinstalling during Art Basel Miami Beach



Michelle Maccarone [right] with Paul McCarthy's chocolate Santas

MIAMI POST MORTEM

by Ben Davis

Miami art week is well in the past now, and everyone survived, more or less. The consensus is in: The vast art-fair apparatus may have wobbled under the weight of 20-plus fairs, but it remains intact. Though business was a little slow at some of the smaller fairs, optimism persists, though tempered somewhat by talk of a possible recession in 2008.

Art Basel Miami Beach, Dec. 6-10, 2007, remains an impressive art-and-money machine, allowing longtime fair director **Samuel Keller** to exit on a high note. The effect of his departure, by the way, shouldn't be overstated. He remains behind the scenes in Basel, an *éminence gris* for Art Basel's new directorial triumvirate of **Cay Sophie Rabinowitz**, **Annette Schönholzer** and **Marc Spiegler**. As for the new art on view in Miami Beach this year, the consensus was that it trended towards the familiar.

One definite highlight of the fair was New York dealer **Michele Maccarone's** booth full of **Paul McCarthy's** ten-inch-tall chocolate Santas holding a Christmas-tree-like butt plug. As is by now well known, the boxed confections, made with 14 ounces of Guittard semisweet dark chocolate each, were manufactured at Maccarone's New York City gallery, an operation that runs until Christmas Eve. In context, the popularity of the work -- some 1,600 have been sold at \$100 a piece -- provided a sardonic commentary on the art-world's "taste" for McCarthy's signature abjection.

While ABMB is the place to find high-key contemporary art by all the most venerable figures, the glories of commerce have become a key theme of the weekend, and art that directly imitated ordinary consumer goods was everywhere. Chinese bad boy **Xu Zhen** created a fully functioning Chinese supermarket in **ShanghART's** "Art Nova" booth, allowing visitors to purchase the emptied-out packages of cheap goods like gum and shampoo. At the **Lehmann Maupin** booth, **Lee Bul** had a chain-mail chandelier -- chandeliers were a major motif at ABMB -- while art-bricoleur **Tom Sachs** went straight to the point at **Sperone Westwater** with the image of a great big dollar bill branded on a sheet of plywood with a wood-burning kit.

A few clearings could be found in the capacious commercial jungle of Art Basel Miami Beach. At New York's **Francis M. Naumann Fine Art**, the gallery showed off the "Daughters of Dada" show of female Dada artists, which I had missed in New York and was glad to see in this Florida revival. The gallery assistant was ready with a brochure (rather than a price list, though I'm sure the works were for sale), lending a quixotic charm to this scholarly moment amid all the commercial posturing.

A note of relief was also offered by **Nuno Ramos**, who put a grid of warm light bulbs on the ceiling of the booth of **Galeria Fortes Vilaça** from Sao Paulo. Each light had a pull cord, and visitors could turn the lights on and off, adding a bit of interactive fun to the fair environment. The work ended up selling for \$120,000, but parents



Lee Bul chandelier at Lehmann Maupin



Tom Sachs
Dollar Bill
2007
Sperone Westwater



Inside Xu Zhen's Chinese supermarket at ShanghART



"Daughters of Dada" at the booth of Francis M. Naumann Fine Art

were still hoisting their toddlers up on their shoulders to reach for the light cords.

Before leaving the fair, I stopped by the **Artnet** booth to kibitz on the progress of the **virtual version** of Art Basel Miami Beach, which is now online. We were surrounded by small booths for an amazing number of art publications, each devoted to its own niche in the booming art business. Especially notable was the glut of magazines catering to art as a lifestyle instrument for the mega-rich, with titles like *Art and Living: The Magazine that Brings Art to Life*.

Outside of the convention center, a number of satellite fairs had set up in the motels lining Collins Avenue, the main drag of Miami Beach. The best of the motel fairs was **Aqua Art Miami 2007** at the **Aqua Hotel**, the cool tones of which perfectly embodied the marriage of easygoing Seattle, home base of the Aqua organizers, and easygoing Miami, where they have made their name. Aqua's different position in relation to the lifestyle politics surrounding art was symbolized by the free beer, in contrast to the \$6-a-glass champagne cart that trolled the isles of the Convention Center.

Austin's **Art Palace** featured eye-catching color photographs by **Buster Graybill**, whose esthetic channels post-minimalism through his own working-class Texas roots. Graybill's photos are records of ephemeral, unstable projects, like the image of enormous, over-inflated black inner tubes, knotted together and straining out of the frame of a truck, both braid-like abstract sculpture and disaster waiting to happen. As appealing as they were, however, I couldn't help but notice a scarcity of red dots by these cool images, listed for \$1,900 each.

Moving down the luxury goods scale, the focus at Aqua often was on the carpet. The room of London's **Nettie Horn** gallery featured **Debbie Lawson's** *Oasis* (2007), an oriental rug transformed into an island of tropical calm, sprouting with tiny palm trees formed of rug scraps. It was \$6,000. The Williamsburg gallery **Eyewash** boasted *Avestan*, a table-top model city by the New York sculptor **Linda Ganjian**, this one made of construction paper and including a grid of meticulous abstract forms. Gandjian's work looked great, but remained unsold at \$15,000 at fair's end. The gallery did find enthusiastic buyers for a number of her circuit-board-like collages incorporating gold leaf, though.

One of the virtues of 2007's "art fair overkill" is that it made a mockery of any pretense towards comprehensiveness. You have to make some choices before you even begin. And for me, the down-market fairs had their own special appeal -- the dealers were hungrier and business was leaner. I befriended a group of young artists from the spirited San Francisco-based **Micaëla Gallery** at the newly minted **Art Now** fair, stationed in a narrow fourth-four room at the **Claremont Hotel**.

They had been up installing for a good 14 hours, carefully cramming their art into the room. **Peter Foucault** had a tiny robot zipping back and forth on the floor, automatically making drawings by scribbling marks onto a paper laid out in the narrow space beneath the bed frame. His video of a paper castle being washed away on the beach was on display in the bathroom, next to a model of the original construction, situated on a glass shelf. **Scott Kiernan** had a video on the resident TV, with another projection in the bathtub. **Jenna North**, who makes small, gray-scale geometric paintings meant to evoke vibrating sound effects, had brought a bedspread made out of paint to cover the bed, but told me that the artwork began to melt when the hotel air-conditioning failed on the first day of the fair.



Nuno Ramos installation at Galeria Fortes Vilaça



Chilling out around the pool at the Aqua Art fair at the Aqua Hotel



Work by Buster Graybill at Art Palace

Most fair coverage is implicitly from the point of view of dealers (sales) or collectors (prices). But more and more, the Miami art fairs are a place for artists as well, and it was good to see some in action. The artists at Micaëla were facing the paradoxes of fair esthetics. "My art takes time to understand," Micaëla's **Anne Yalon** said -- and she is right, since she had brought a series of three scrolls made from copper roofing salvaged from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, stamped in text relating to the concept. "There's a story and a process people have to understand. What do we do if collectors don't want to stop?"

Thus does the social element reflect back into the artistic. The fair weekend, with its in-crowds and out-crowds and regimented social hierarchies, has a high school feel to it. The mantra is who do you know, what lists are you on? The crush of Magazine-Brand-Location parties reached a high-tide of absurdity at a random party at **Charcoal Studios** near the **Pulse** fair in Wynwood, co-hosted by **Freight + Volume** and *Black Book* magazine. Billed as an "art / retail experience," the space was full of art, artist-designed skateboard decks -- a popular equation, these days -- and racks of breezy fashion. In addition to *Black Book*, the organizers had accepted sponsorship deals from a maniacal combination of companies, leading to plates of sushi accompanied by either cocktails made of **Bustelo** coffee and tequila, or "Purple-tinis," mixed from **Purple**, "the new anti-oxidant drink." Hostesses were passing out samples of **Calvin Klein Man** cologne. It was as if companies were just throwing handfuls of things at the art world to see what stuck.

The prize for toxic concoctions, however, goes to the late-night do hosted by **Peres Projects** and **Terence Koh** on Thursday. Held at the **Goldrush** strip club in Miami, it was meant as a launch party for the newest issue of the interesting artist-designed *Daddy* magazine (guest edited this time around by **Franz West**) -- though guests could easily have confused it for a launch of *Xcitement*, the Miami adult dancing scene's own promotional publication, which was also being passed out. At Goldrush, sundry art journalists, insiders and artists hobnobbed with guys looking to get lap dances, showing just how far and fast the notion of the "commercial ready-made" has travelled since the **Takashi Murakami** boutique opened at the **Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art**. The sleaze-fest seemed to indicate that the art world had plunged almost irretrievably far down the rabbit hole of irony -- though it also evoked the *Onion* headline, "Ironic Porn Purchase Leads to Unironic Ejaculation."

Given this soulless feeling of the "scene," it would be easy to wash your hands of it all. Talking to the artists at Micaëla, however, I realized that the social dynamic of Miami does contain moment of truth for contemporary art that is worth noting, as it threads together the various parts of the weekend's otherwise fragmented experience.

If there is one lesson of the spectacle of the competing fairs, with their battles for position and publicity, it is that the market is fundamentally *stupid* -- there is only an impressionistic connection between what sells and what is good. A hard fracture exists between the two things. Salesmanship makes up the difference. As an artist, going into the fairs expecting otherwise, with the laissez-faire notion that the market is intelligent and selects the best is a recipe for having a fractured experience.

Those serious about collecting contemporary art are a small number of people, so all the talk about the "art market" is actually an abstraction covering up a few thousand person-to-person relations with individual figures. As for who gets shown in the galleries, what is true in the economy in general -- where 60 percent of people get their jobs through "personal networks" -- is also true of art, with the added quirk that art is a qualitative discipline, and its criteria of



Debbie Lawson
Oasis
 2007
 Nettie Horn



Linda Ganjian
Avestan
 2007
 eyewash



Micaëla Gallery at the Art Now fair in
 the Claremont Hotel

selection thus particularly subjective and personal. The further down the totem pole you go, the more visible is the who-knows-who element that greases the wheels of who gets selected to be shown.

The sense of self-assured, instantly present value at the Convention Center is the reified accumulation of thousands of social transactions, filtered upwards through the art hierarchy by capillary action. This does not mean that there is no good or bad art, that it's all just PR -- but this "social unconscious" of esthetic experience is a fact, and for artists the feverish, teeming parties of Miami are its physical incarnation, spilling over the art and in some cases overrunning it. It may or may not transform an artist into a machine for self-promotion -- Koh might be a good example (as he told *T* magazine regarding the Goldrush party: "I am the **Naomi Campbell** of the art world.")

Heading for the airport late Saturday night, I came across a work by the Brooklyn-based graffiti artist **Ellis Gallagher** on the street. In his characteristically guileless style, Ellis had traced the shadow outlines of objects on the street along Collins Avenue in chalk -- in this case a garbage can's silhouette as it was cast by the streetlight. He had added his own name beside the outline, plus a copyright symbol.

For me, the work seemed to reduce the experience to its zero degree: the lone artist, out on the street, getting his name out there and waiting to be noticed by the scene as it passes by.

See you in 2008.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.



Installation view of Peter Foucault's *Future Fortress*, at Art Now



Installation view of "Heist" at Miami's Charcoal Studios



Souvenir from Javier Peres/Terence Koh party at the Goldrush Gentleman's Club



Work by Ellis on Collins Avenue