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## Sun, sea and surprises at Art Basel

Jan Dalley

There's plenty of good old-fashioned abstraction at Miami Beach this week — but there are some unexpected offerings too



Audience members experience the innovative 'MEEM 4 MIAMI: A Story Ballet about the Internet'

Miami Beach should be spelt Wysiwyg. It gives out just what it promises: the toytown lines of an art deco spire against a china-blue sky; huge palm trees standing sentinel, their trunks wrapped in twinkly Christmas lights; boisterous Latino kids with their pulsing music; stick-thin creatures in fantasy shoes folding themselves into space-age cars; the miles of dreamy beach and sea vistas; boarded-up shops next to glassy-sleek apartment blocks — no contrast is too extreme, and nothing disappoints.

In the land of Wysiwyg, the art is appropriate. At Art Basel in Miami Beach, the dominant trope this week is good, old-fashioned, expensive abstraction: lots of painting, nothing too complicated. Conceptual art doesn't go with the place, really. But that is not to say Wysiwyg is without its complexity. Two of this week's best offerings, tangentially related to each other, illustrate that.

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The first is a fine byproduct of the growing art-fair phenomenon. As the fairs become ever more sophisticated and competitive, so does their desire to include prestige, non-commercial adjuncts, curated or commissioned. Thus, when Art Basel's director Marc Spiegler spotted, at last year's Performa biennial in New York, an inventive dance work made by artist Ryan McNamara, he knew he had found the star of this year's ancillary programme.

"MEEM: A Story Ballet about the Internet", remade for its Miami setting with a double-strength 28 dancers, was the most innovative performance work I have seen for a long time. Like most brilliant ideas, its premise is simple.

The setting, also an inspired choice by Spiegler, is the Miami Grand Theater, a huge, now quasi-abandoned former Playboy theatre, half spooky and half comic, with walls, carpets and plush velvet curtains in a shade of goeey chocolate so beloved of the 1970s and huge swaths of faded gold hinting at tacky Hefner-fests past.

There's no way to describe the process without a giant spoiler. But no one had spoiled it for me, so it came as a shock when, as the dance unfolded on the stage in front of us in the conventional way, a silent human presence materialised behind my chair and lifted it, and me, up on a sort of forklift, and wheeled me up a ramp on to the stage itself, depositing me behind the dancers. Simultaneously, dozens of people-movers began silently, efficiently, shifting the audience one by one to every part of the theatre and, indeed, the whole

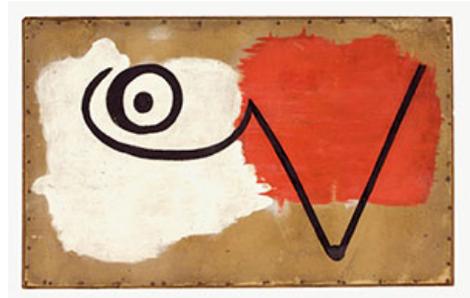
building, where dancers were performing on a staircase, in the abandoned kitchens, on an upper tier, against a side wall. We were lifted, deposited, lifted again and repositioned, facing this way or that, watching now a single dancer in contortions, next a dignified pair in full balletic mode. The choreography of the silent people-shifting was as complex, and as mesmerising, as that of the vigorous and noisy dance.

The effect was remarkably potent. McNamara set out to emulate the experiential layers of the internet experience, and I'd frankly doubted that he could. But as he smashes the usual "contract" between performer and viewer, and we are made to surf the multiple performances, our attention repeatedly fractured and recreated from multiple angles, his work does invoke and question much that is familiar in our online lives, including even the petty anxieties (is something more interesting happening on another site just behind you?).

If I say little about the music or the dance as such, that's part of the point: the experience became all about ourselves, our perceptions, our ways of absorbing experience.

Rose Lee Goldberg, the Performa biennial's inspirational founder, explained over breakfast the next day how she had commissioned and helped to develop the work over a two-year period. Her belief is that multidisciplinary work is nothing new, that art, movement and the wider world have long been in dialogue, and this was echoed by one of the best of the exhibits in the fair itself.

The Zurich-based Galerie Gmurzynska has created a booth that evokes 20th-century's artists' involvement with other artforms, as well as their challenge to received notions of sophistication. Entitled "A Kid Could Do That!", it is elaborately curated, with film footage — newly remastered by director Baz Luhrmann — of a 1930s performance by the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, for which Joan Miró made the designs and some paintings, including "Jeux d'Enfants", an evocatively bust-up painting on board that sits on an easel beside the screen.



Joan Miró's 'Jeux d'Enfants'

The booth is decked out as a dark-walled library (so un-Miami), illustrating the era's painterly and intellectual fascination with children's art in superb works by Malevich, Kurt Schwitters, Kandinsky, more Miró, Yves Klein and Picasso (whose double boast was that it took him four years to paint like Raphael but a lifetime to paint like a child). Bringing the theme up to date are canvases by Robert Indiana, Francis Bacon and Cy Twombly, although the links to children's work are a bit of a stretch here.

If curating, that horribly overused term, is the creation of a backstory for a work of art, an explanatory context often drawn from other artforms or the wider world that alters and enriches our understanding and experience, then these two unexpected highlights of the Miami week speak well to each other. The Galerie Gmurzynska's version is a commercial one, of course: the pictures are elegantly presented but the point is to sell them. "MEEM 4 Miami" does something altogether more game-changing — nothing less, I'd say, than a remaking of our notions of performance.

*Until December 7 [artbasel.com/miami-beach](http://artbasel.com/miami-beach)*

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