



Happy art, happy people at Art Basel Miami Beach

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12/03/2014 9:47 PM | Updated: 12/04/2014 8:47 AM



Artist Urs Fischer's 'Small Rain' at the Sadie Coles Gallery during opening day of Art Basel Miami Beach at the Miami Beach Convention Center on Wednesday, December 3, 2014. About the art: Installation by artist Urs Fischer, using oil-based primer, stainless steel and nylon filament to create 1,080 raindrops. AL DIAZ / MIAMI HERALD STAFF




News flash from Art Basel Miami Beach, the big-top fair that opened Wednesday with a lineup of works that not a few of the connoisseurs on hand pronounced among the best, if not *the* best, of the 13 editions so far: Art can make people happy.

And there were lots of happy people on the floor of the Beach convention center among the throngs of well-shod VIP collectors, curators and gallery owners from around the world who bought and sold big-ticket, top-notch pieces of contemporary art at an unflagging pace from the moment the doors opened at 11 a.m.

It wasn't just the large prices the art was fetching for the galleries, the enthusiasm of the collectors or the breadth and depth of the selections on display in booth after booth that sent a collective wave of joy across the vast convention center floor.

There was, according to The Art Newspaper, in a piece headlined, "Accentuate the positive," something upbeat about the art itself: Though contemporary art can often be dour, the newspaper said, "happy-looking art" seems to do especially well in Miami, and there was no shortage of it on view Wednesday.

Bright, boldly colored art was everywhere, with pictorial works — abstract paintings in particular — appearing to predominate. But sculptures and installations were, as always, also a draw.

"It's almost an oxymoron that art is fun, but in Miami it is," said gallerist Jack Shainman. "The whole city partakes."

In one installation, the joy rained from the ceiling. A work from Urs Fischer, *Small Rain*, proved an early crowd favorite: Over 100 green, avocado-shaped raindrops suspended in a cloud that filled the booth of British gallerist Sadie Coles.

Pace Prints of New York featured Will Cotton sculptures of multi-tiered cakes that looked so real they tempt the viewer to run a finger through the pink-and-white frosting.

"We have very upbeat artists," said Pace director Kristin Heming, whose booth is in the Editions section. "Color always makes people happy. This seems to be the direction now."

Though, she added, the happier works sell equally well in New York as they do in Miami.

Almost everywhere the quality was uniformly dazzling, many fair-goers said, proof that joyful, beautiful art doesn't preclude depth or complexity.

For instance, two ancient Chinese pots, roughly 2,000 years old, and covered by artist Ai Weiwei in glossy auto paint, sat in a corner of the Mary Boone Gallery booth. The pair — one red, the other blue — list for \$250,000. (At the new Pérez Art Museum Miami earlier this year, a protester smashed a similar painted-over vase by Weiwei.)

The bright modern paint, meant for luxury automobiles, said gallery director Ron Warren, is meant as social commentary on the tendency of contemporary culture to "eradicate" the ancient.

As he strolled through the fair among groups of friends and museum groups who were clearly enjoying themselves, Nazy Vasseggh, director of London's Masterpiece Fair, concluded that solemn European press accounts discounting Miami's as "just a party fair" were wrong. The fun doesn't seem to get in the way of appreciating the art, he said.

"I've been pleasantly surprised. Being social and vibrant doesn't take away from serious attention to the art," he said.

Miami collectors Mera and Don Rubell were even more ebullient. They happily pronounced this among the best fairs they'd seen — even if Mera's feet were aching after standing for five hours the day before at the opening of their show, *To Have and To Hold: 50 Years of Marriage and Collecting* at their Rubell Family Collection in Wynwood.

"The strongest Art Basel ever," Don Rubell flatly said.

If those endorsements don't make fair administrators smile, then the sales and the prices being rung up by the galleries should — Art Basel is, after all, primarily a commercial enterprise.

At the Kelly gallery, owner Sean Kelly said he had "the best first day ever" in his 13 years of participation. He sold not just work hanging in his booth but work he showed on his iPad, for the equivalent of selling the booth out twice over. Sales ranged from \$500,000 to \$25,000, the price for each of 13 paintings by newcomer Hugo McCloud.

"It's been exceptional," Kelly said.

Shainman said a Nick Cave "hustle coat" lined with jewels priced at \$60,000 went "in the first second" at his booth, adding: "I could have sold it 10 times over."

For gallerist Michael Jon Radziewicz, of Miami and Detroit, who leapt from the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) last year to this year's Art Basel's Nova Section, his big-fair debut was a happy hit. All but one of the works he put on display, by artists JPW3 and Sayre Gomez from Los Angeles, sold out within hours of opening, Radziewicz said.

Collector Joe Berg, meanwhile, zeroed in early on a painting from rising star Natalie Frank, whose works resemble a humorous take on dark masters Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud without losing the wild grotesquerie. He, too, was happy. For \$27,000 at the booth of Chicago gallery Rhona Hoffman, Berg thinks he got a good deal.

Also just a few hours into the show, Mathias Rastorfer, of the scrupulously curated Galerie Gmurzynska booth, which is showing modern masters in an exhibit designed by married film auteurs Baz Luhrmann and Catherine Martin, had sold several works in the \$100,000 range. He also reported serious interest in some \$1million-plus works.

But you don't have to drop five or six figures to enjoy the show. After extending the VIP hours to give serious collectors more quality time at the gallery booths, the convention center doors will swing open to the general public at 3p.m. Thursday.

And unless they have rich, art-collecting friends who like to invite them into their homes, visitors to this year's fair will have unusually felicitous opportunities to see art they might not otherwise see.

Fair-goers will encounter what amounts to multiple high-end art exhibits under one roof, testament to gallerists' efforts this year to present something new and, in the case of the Kabinett sector booths, which show curated works, also comprehensive. Those include a collection of rarely seen early collages by Joseph Cornell, best known for his later boxes, at the Van Doren Waxter Gallery, and intricate drawings by Leon Kelly, at Francis M. Nauman Fine Art.

The year's non-solemn note is happily evident right at the entrance, where the Gmurzynska booth was getting a lot of attention for its exhibit, entitled, in a bit of humorous whimsy, "A Kid Could Do That" — a comment often heard at modern-art fairs from befuddled viewers.

The booth — hung with abstract masterworks by Joan Miro, Kazimir Malevich, Wifredo Lam, Cy Twombly, Francis Bacon and others — is set up like a schoolroom, with a large table and books for sitting and reading, with the idea of helping people better understand the art, Rastorfer said.

Visitors this year are also enjoying a slightly more Zen-like atmosphere, with more breathing space thanks to a new spatial arrangement that pushed dining from the center to the edges of the floor. Also helping was the extended VIP-only hours, which meant an absence of the frantic early atmosphere of past openings.

"I think it's beautiful," said artist Michelle Oka Doner, who splits her time between Miami and New York and was showing work at Art Basel at the Marlborough booth, of the new layout. "It's very serene."

Those feeling the stress, moreover, had a new option: a special resting room at the Fondation Beyeler booth, one of several installations designed by performance artist and art guru Marina Abramovic to help visitors relax at Miami Art Week venues.

At the Beyeler booth, weary visitors lay on cots, eyes shut, under colorful blankets, noise-blocking headphones clamped over their ears. Some were even smiling. They looked happy.

Miami Herald staff writer Jordan Levin and Miami Herald freelancer Anne Tschida contributed to this report.

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 **Micco Mann** · Top Commenter · University of Miami
Wonder how long it will be before somebody more interested in texting than art walks through "Small Rain"? I'm betting the woman in the picture behind the art will be first. Which raises the question: If a person walks unknowingly through the art work, does that make it an accident or does it transform the piece and make it "performance art"? Or, if it is to be performance art, must the walker carry an umbrella? Oh, how layered with nuance our modern world has become.
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 **David Rodriguez-Zamora** · Top Commenter
I take it that you say this only in jest, for the woman is part of the artwork!
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