

What's the future for Miami's public and private collections?

The departure of the Miami Art Museum's director has reignited the debate over the city's cultural direction

By Gareth Harris. From Art Basel Miami Beach daily edition Published online: 04 December 2009

The aftershock of Terence Riley's departure from his post as the director of the Miami Art Museum (MAM) at the end of October is still being felt in Miami's art world, prompting soul-searching about how the city's cultural scene will now evolve. Key figures, including Craig Robins, a trustee of MAM and local property developer, along with Bonnie Clearwater, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (MoCA), say that they did not expect Riley to step down. The former chief had just unveiled the detailed plans for the museum's \$220m -Herzog and de Meuron--designed new home to be built in downtown Bicentennial Park by 2013. "He saw the writing on the wall. It was -either get out now or commit for another five years," says Robins. "Terry was brilliant but his strength does not lie in construction management," he added.

Riley, who will serve as a consultant to MAM, was reportedly frustrated by a spending squeeze imposed by Miami-Dade County earlier this year, which resulted in a \$350,000 funding cut. The museum laid off eight members of staff and senior management saw their salaries cut by 5%.

Riley's resignation has thrown the spotlight on the relationship between the city's museums and private galleries, which have flourished since ABMB launched in Florida in 2002. Prominent local collector Marty Margulies said: "I have no interest at all in the Miami Art Museum and they have no interest in me." On liaising with local collectors, Robins responded: "It's normal that there are those kinds of issues." Three other MAM trustees declined to comment, while the museum has appointed an interim director, John Wetenhall, the executive director of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida. When asked if MAM should have mustered more support from the city's patrons, Aaron Podhurst, the chairman of the museum's board of trustees, said: "Miami is the only major US city without a world-class museum which has led private collectors to create their own facilities to showcase their art. Once we have a facility that can accommodate these types of collections, we're confident that the great collectors in Miami will come together over time to create a public resource." Riley has previously said: "[The museum] won't be a success without the support of collectors. No museum is."

Podhurst nonetheless points to Riley's success in building up the collection, stressing that the MAM Collector's Council, founded in 2005, has donated \$1m for the purchase of 32 works by artists such as -Kehinde Wiley and Lawrence Weiner. The Rubells have donated 11 works, while 35 works on paper were given by trustee Dennis Scholl and his wife Debra. A tenth anniversary acquisitions drive in 2007 meant that works by Doug Aitken, Sol LeWitt and Susan Rothenberg entered the collection. According to the museum, "funding is in place for construction" of the new venue, with \$100m awarded by Miami-Dade County towards the project. "The building will

happen for sure,” said Miami dealer Fredric Snitzer (G15), a sentiment shared by Micky Wolfson, founder of the Wolfsonian, Miami Beach, who said: “The county cannot afford [it] to fail.” Developments at MAM have provoked debate around the art fairs this week about the role of museums and private galleries. Yesterday, one dealer at Art Basel Miami Beach said: “What MAM needs is an Eli Broad”, someone like the Los Angeles philanthropist who will act as a lead patron for the organisation, pledging millions of dollars for acquisitions and loaning numerous works of art as Broad has done with museums in Los Angeles.

Miami dealer David Castillo, who is showing at Nada (stand 311), said: “Miami is different from any other cultural destination. The arts community is much smaller. If you combined even one or two of the handful of major contemporary art collections you’d have a major contemporary art centre. The community would be better served.” Local artist Adler Guerrier believes: “A lot of collectors reluctantly have a relationship with the main -museums. They probably feel overly burdened and that they must support these -institutions.”

Private collector spaces continue to shine during ABMB. Visits to venues such as the Rubell Family Collection and Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation are part of the ABMB package, with further spaces springing up. Craig Robins plans to open his new contemporary art museum, housed in a 250,000 sq. ft Design District block, by 2012. In the same part of town is the new, much-anticipated 30,000 sq. ft gallery devoted to the 1,000-strong contemporary art holdings of collectors Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz. This three-storey space incorporates project rooms for rotating displays and a research centre. Works by artists such as Rachel Harrison, Ana Mendieta and Tracey Emin fill the gallery.

Rosa de la Cruz says that she hopes the new MAM “will materialise” and believes that “we [private collector spaces] will all complement each other and create a critical mass”. The De la Cruzs are associated with MoCA North Miami, having donated several works including Teresita Fernández’s *Untitled (Pool)*, 1996. “I would love to continue the relationship with MoCA and share lectures et cetera. It is also important to support acquisitions,” adds de la Cruz. Marty Margulies is another supporter of Bonnie Clearwater, the director of MoCA.

Clearwater acknowledges the generosity of local patrons: “They’re still young collectors and should enjoy having the time to look at and think about the works in their collection.” Following the expiry of the lease at its satellite branch, the Goldman Warehouse in Wynwood, earlier this year, MoCA also faces the challenge of upgrading its space. Clearwater has plans to triple MoCA’s current exhibition space in North Miami by 2013. “The new extension was modestly estimated at the time of the concept plan [in 2007] as \$18m,” she said.

In Miami Beach, the Bass Museum of Art is emerging as a power player under the directorship of Silvia Karman Cubiñá, formerly founding director of the now defunct Moore Space in the Miami Design District. “The calibre of the crowd at the exhibition launch this week [dedicated to the collection of Mexican billionaire Eugenio López Alonso] was incredible,” said Fredric Snitzer. “It was as if the ABMB crowd had walked over the road for the evening.”