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Art Basel 2016 opens to smaller but enthusiastic crowds



Art Basel Miami Beach attendees line up at the entrance of the Miami Beach Convention Center's Hall C at 11:00 a.m. Wednesday to get in. Rene Rodriguez rrodriguez@MiamiHerald.com

By Rene Rodriguez, Jane Wooldridge and Siobhan Morrissey
rrodriguez@miamiherald.com

Collectors and art enthusiasts turned out in smaller numbers than usual for the first day of Art Basel 2016, the annual Miami Beach mega art fair widely considered to be the best of its kind in the Americas.

But the VIP crowd that did show up brought their wallets with them — and were in a mood to buy.

Glenn Scott Wright, director of the London-based Victoria Miro, said they had gotten off to a strong start, with sales in the “seven figures” just 90 minutes after the doors had opened. Among their offerings were two acrylic “Infinity Net” paintings by Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, as well as a large infinity mirror room, “Where the Lights in My Heart Go,” which uses reflections and beams of ambient light to create a cosmic sensation for up to four patrons at a time.

“Technically, we could pack up and leave right now and we would have had a successful fair,” Wright said about the early sales.

It's a 10 -- Miami gallery owner Frederic Snitzer on the first day of Art Basel 2016

The 15th edition of Art Basel, which anchors what has become known as Miami Art Week, boasts exhibits from 269 galleries — 21 new to the fair — from 29 countries. The opening-day crowd didn't fill the four halls of the Miami Beach Convention Center as densely as in previous years. "Just look around. There are fewer people," said Sarah Watson, Los Angeles director of Spruth Magers.

But art dealers weren't complaining.

On a scale of 1 to 10, "it's a 10," said Miami gallery owner Frederic Snitzer, who had made several sales within the first few hours of the show.

Miami Beach's David Castillo Gallery registered two sales on opening day. A club chair suite, with coffee table, titled "One (Blue Frost)" (2016), by Xaviera Simmons sold for \$110,000 to a collector from Michigan. Sanford Biggers' "Banneker," an antique quilt, plywood and gold leaf geometric wall sculpture, sold to a prominent Miami collector for \$40,000.

Philippe Charpentier of Paris' mor charpentier gallery was pleased with opening day results, calling them "promising." He sold two editions of Lawrence Abu Hamdan's *Beneath the Surface* (2015) seven-panel works, including sound system, for \$37,000 each. He also sold a piece by Colombian artist Oscar Muñoz, titled "Domestico," featuring a series of blank photo frames made of white marble. The work sold for \$40,000.

The lighter crowd was somewhat by design, said Art Basel global director Marc Spiegler, noting that the VIP list had been tightened and the VIP hours stretched. "In the past, the galleries have always complained that there are too many people," he said. "This year, there are fewer people, but the percentage of high-quality collectors is higher."

"It's feeling very solid," said Sean Kelly, founder of Sean Kelly Gallery, where Perez Art Museum Miami director Franklin Sirmans was hoping to purchase a video by Cuba's Los Carpinteros for the museum's collection.

Basel organizers said there was a strong representation from museums worldwide at this year's event, including a group from Turkey.

NOT JUST FOR COLLECTORS

But the fair isn't only for collectors looking to acquire new pieces. An ambitious exhibition by Switzerland's Galerie Gmurzynska, "The Future is Our Only Goal," celebrates the 100th anniversary of the 1917 Russian Revolution with a collection of Avant-Garde sketches, paintings, sculptures and advertising materials. The exhibit, curated by Norman Rosenthal and housed in an exclusive booth designed by Claude Ruiz-Picasso, included Pablo Picasso's "Verre et radis" (1944) and a photograph blow-up of an original negative from Sergei Eisenstein's landmark silent film "Battleship Potemkin." Not all of the artworks included in the exhibit are for sale.

The most notable celebrities of the day were Barbra Streisand and James Brolin (she's performing here next week). Martha Stewart was also in attendance.

During a press conference held earlier in the morning, Spiegler addressed the difficulties 2016 posed for the fair's organizers, including the Zika outbreak, which had an impact on attendance.

"We faced health issues, political conditions, Brexit, Brazil," he said. "This is a time of great change, but change can be positive. History tells us difficult times produce great art. We can expect art that probes at our society, its past and its possible future."

Nearly all fairgoers agreed that the quality of works high -- higher than in some years past -- with a strong balance between modern masters like Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder, Constantin Brancusi; contemporary painters like James Rosenquist and Robert Rauschenberg; and fresh works created in response to the current world order.

POLITICAL ART

Gavin Brown's enterprise gallery displayed Rirkrit Tiravanija's "The Tyranny of Common Sense Has Reached Its Final Stage," a three-panel acrylic and newspaper on linen collage comprised of the entire issue of The New York Times published the day after Donald Trump was elected President.

Barbara Kruger's large canvas at Spruth Magers gallery succinctly described the wide array of human conditions (FATUOUS FOOLS, BLOATED EGOS, LOVERS, SINGERS, SPEAKERS, SYCOPHANTS...); the \$300,000 work was reserved early in the day.

At Blum & Poe, Sam Durant's light-box proclaimed "End White Supremacy." Though the work was created in 2008, gallerist Tim Blum felt it — and other works centered on racism — would resonate at the fair. "We were already intending to bring a lot of what is here, but we amped it up. People are really into it."

Overall, 21st-century vehicles for artistic expression — video, light works, sound and interactive installations — were scarce. But that also meant the over-the-top bling and provocative-without-a-point works were also muted. "There may be factors that reduced the social butterflies, but having them is not the goal," Spiegler said. "The gallerists have the same mix of 'happy' and 'waiting' at this point as they have in years past."

Anne Tschida and Ricardo Mor contributed to this report.