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The business behind the artist: Miami's art gallery scene still evolving

BY HANNAH SAMPSON
HSAMPSON@MIAMIHERALD.COM

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DAVID CASTILLO

Castillo has been an art dealer since he was in his early 20s, but first he had to realize that pre-med wasn't his calling at Yale University. After studying history and art history for undergrad, he spent a year at the Vatican studying Latin with a Carmelite monk.

That year of Latin, he said, helped with the other languages he speaks (Spanish, Italian, French and some German), which has come in handy for socializing with clients around the world.

"It's a whole social personality-driven business; it's not like selling a million T-shirts," he said. "It's very different from that because people have to not only like the artwork, they have to like the gallery and the person they're buying it from."

Valedictorian of the class of 1992 at Hialeah High, Castillo grew up going to photo exhibits and the Center for the Fine Arts, the precursor to the Miami Art Museum. His gallery represents several South Florida artists; everything Castillo shows deals with the theme of identity. About 30 percent of his clientele is local, and the rest are mostly from Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and Texas. Castillo has been selected to participate in the main Art Basel Miami Beach fair twice so far, including last year, when he sold out.

"By the end, you're exhausted, but it feels good because you have this really wide, wide audience that is looking at what you're doing and deciding not only to have faith in you and the artists, but to put money behind it," he said.

He's not part of the fair this year, but Castillo said he understands how competitive it is. He doesn't do satellite fairs, but he will hold a reception Saturday for the large group show that runs through the end of the year. "Not every gallery gets in every year to every fair, but when you're operating at a certain level you understand that this year I didn't get in, but so didn't 40 other great galleries in other cities," he said. "It's nothing personal as people sometimes want to make it seem."

The show he opened in late November is already half sold, and he knows there are more opportunities waiting. He has sold at fairs in Berlin and New York and will be at the LA Art Show in January. "You accumulate new audiences and that is the reality of a gallery today," he said. "It's not like you just sit waiting for people to show up."