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Whitney Biennial to Miami Artists: It's Not Us, It's You

By BRETT SOKOL NOV. 27, 2016



“Untitled (BLCK-We wear the mask)” (2007-08), an installation by Adler Guerrier, at the Whitney Museum in 2008. Credit Sara Rose/Associated Press

MIAMI — As the art world’s eyes turn toward this week’s [Art Basel Miami Beach](#) fair, you might imagine its homegrown artists relishing the moment. Yet more than a little grumbling can be heard here, much of it over the recent announcement of the 63 artists selected for the [Whitney Museum of American Art’s 2017 Biennial](#).

For the fourth Biennial in a row, not a single Miami artist was chosen.

It’s a sharp contrast to the previous decade. Buoyed by the attention-sparking catalyst of [Art Basel](#), Miami began to think of itself as a vital new cultural hub, behind only New York and Los Angeles. “Maybe we’re in an ebb moment,” mused [Adler Guerrier](#), one of three Miami artists picked for the [2008 Biennial](#), the last time Miami made the cut. “It seems like the larger art world comes here for Basel and then they just leave.”

At stake are more than just bragging rights for inclusion in a show described by the museum as “the country’s pre-eminent survey of the current state of

American art.” “It gives you ‘résumé-worthiness,’” said Mr. Guerrier, pointing to his own experience. Without any gallery representation at the time of his Biennial appearance, he soon after joined the stable of the [David Castillo Gallery](#), one of only two Miami exhibitors in this year’s Basel.

Adding insult, this year's curators, Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, enlisted a Miami-based adviser, Gean Moreno, curator of programs at the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami. Mr. Moreno said he suggested several local artists whose studios were personally visited by the Biennial curators. Yet none were ultimately chosen. The reason? Politics — or the lack thereof.

"They simply didn't fit into the curators' vision of engaging the social moment," he said. "It's not that there aren't good Miami artists, but the determining factor was art that addressed the social upheavals of the last six years, from Occupy to Black Lives Matter to all the thinking around climate change and sea-level rise."

"Not every art scene has to respond to everything," Mr. Moreno acknowledged, insisting that he wasn't proposing an ideological litmus test. But the lack of Miami art about the rise in sea levels seemed particularly glaring to him, given the number of South Florida artists who have had to wade across suddenly flooded sidewalks on bright sunny days. "Who are the artists in Miami working on these issues?" Mr. Moreno asked. "It's been taken up by the scientists at universities here, some journalists are addressing it, you're seeing civic responses from some mayors. But I couldn't name one local exhibit that has taken climate change seriously."

In years past, many critics of the Biennial have felt that agitprop has dominated at the expense of truly transcendent artwork — so much so that the Whitney's own publicists embraced the controversy and once cheekily promoted the Biennial as "the show you love to hate."

Still, the Whitney's chief curator, Scott Rothkopf, defended his team's political lens as the natural outgrowth of a highly charged presidential election year. And he cautioned against drawing larger conclusions. "I don't want to say what Miami's artists are doing is irrelevant. They just weren't the artists our curators were most interested in bringing into the conversation," he explained. "Because I'm involved in the process, what I'm aware of is that as much as the curators hope to represent the breadth of the country, the diversity of different art forms and art makers, at the end of the day, with 63 spots, some boxes will be left unchecked."

For his part, Mr. Moreno sees signs of an emerging consciousness in Miami that should augur well for a 2019 Biennial that could also be politically freighted: "There's a hangover, a realization that Art Basel's commercial culture didn't produce a Miami art scene." In the meantime, he has a response ready for any artists haranguing him about being excluded from the Biennial: They should thank him.

"There's the other side of Biennial success stories, the Biennial 'curse,'" he said with a chuckle. "For some artists, being in the Biennial is your last hurrah and we never hear of you again. So maybe I didn't recommend you because I didn't want to bury you."