

'The idea is that art can help': how Art Basel Miami tackled the climate crisis

Art Basel Miami

Away from the \$120,000 banana, artists have been using their work to comment on and bring awareness to the climate emergency

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Tue 10 Dec 2019 12.49 EST

Over the last few days, this year's Art Basel Miami has been making headlines for a banana. The artwork, worth \$120,000 and consisting of one taped to a wall, became an irresistible viral hit, even more so when it was eaten.

But beyond the silliness, sustainability was a dominating theme this year at the 17th edition of the week-long art event, which always draws art lovers to over 300 exhibitions, a dozen art fairs and hundreds of VIP parties. Which is ironic, considering Miami art week is probably the most excessive contemporary art event in America; champagne bottles are strewn across South Beach with locals picking up the litter after partygoers, celebrities and art aficionados are long gone.

The climate emergency is making a statement at the art fair circuit, pointing fingers at yachts, the luxury lifestyle, automobile pollution and water bottles. But is it sellable? One curator says that protest art isn't commercial but artists have invested their time regardless. As the Norwegian artist Thale Fastvold recently said: "Science has a communication problem that art can solve." Here are some artworks doing that precisely.

The Zero-Waste Party

Potentially the first ever zero-waste art party in Miami featured locally sourced food, biodegradable plastic forks and wooden plates. The table flowers were donated to the local botanical garden, with the leftover food donated to local missions. Set inside the Miami Beach Botanical Garden, it was hosted by Brooklyn artist Shinique Smith, who creates sculptures from secondhand clothing. The aim was to celebrate the United Nations' sustainability goals; responsible consumption and production, and was co-presented by UBS and the #TogetherBand campaign, which helps the world move towards sustainability goals.

Traffic Jam



Order of Importance by Leandro Erlich. Photograph: Rhona Wise/EPA

The art world can be an insular place so there's something to be said for art that goes beyond the white cube which makes this public art installation by the Argentinian artist Leandro Erlich even more of an eye-grabber. Set on South Beach at Lincoln Road, 66 life-sized

cars made of sand were created to form a traffic jam. The artwork, entitled Order of Importance, is a project centered around the climate emergency. According to the artist, the climate crisis requires immediate action, and Erlich wanted to raise awareness of our responsibility to protect the planet. A commission of the city of Miami Beach, and curated by Ximena Caminos and Brandi Reddick, the sand cars will stand until they deteriorate, though the exhibition closes on 15 December.

The Museum of Plastic



Photograph: Museum of Plastic

This pop-up exhibit, set inside of a conference room of a five-star hotel, is hosted by the ocean conservancy not-for-profit, [Lonely Whale](#). With LED screens, pedestals and

sculptures, it aims to highlight the effects of plastic pollution. One of the artworks is a gigantic receipt detailing how the \$200bn that makes up the water bottle industry could better be spent, be it helping kids graduate from high school or stopping deforestation. The main critique here is on water bottles.

“We use 500 billion single-use plastic bottles every year, it’s an insane number,” said Dune Ives, executive director of Lonely Whale. “We know the plastic packaging market is continuing to grow over next 15 years and will come from oil and gas extraction. For us, this exhibition is an important way to bring together the climate emergency, ocean health and plastic conversation in a tangible way. It’s where people can make a decision and have a direct impact.”

Coral Reef by Everglades Art Lab

Another project that taps into ocean pollution is Coral Projects: Everglades Art Lab, an eco-art project spearheaded by the Brooklyn artist Vanessa Albury. Along with a group of artists, she used her booth at the UNTITLED Miami Beach art fair to promote an upcoming underwater project, where they’re making a coral reef out of ceramic, glass and reusable aluminum, which will launch at the Orcabessa Bay Fish Sanctuary in Jamaica next year. “What I have learned is that we all want the planet to be OK, and we all want to be part of a positive impact,” said Albury. “The idea is that art can help, brings relief.”

Presented by Benrubi Gallery, it features artworks by Albury, Rachel Frank, Thale Fastvold and Tanja Thorjussen with the Reverend Houston Cypress of Love the Everglade. The group are inspired by the ocean advocate and marine biologist Sylvia Earle. “The planet is resilient, so is nature and those who have witnessed the worst still have hope,” adds Albury.

James Clar



Dynamic Entities by James Clar. Photograph: Jane Lombard Gallery

Art fair booths either go one of two ways: they're typically painted all white or are loud bursts of color. The New York artist James Clar decided to go halfway. His new series of climate-centered work at the Jane Lombard Gallery booth at the UNTITLED Miami Beach art fair is set in a booth painted with the bottom half blue, citing rising sea levels, with the top half white. The artworks in *Dynamic Entities* range from LED lights cast in resin to videos of tropical storms and burning flames. One of the minimalist, abstract sculptures is named after the [Kardashev scale](#), a 1964 model created by the Russian astrophysicist Nikola Kardashev, which was created to measure a society's technological advancement in relation to their energy consumption. One [artwork](#) is a screen cast in resin, depicting a water bubble floating to the surface, while another is titled 100% Humidity.

Paper Pulp Furniture

At the Design Miami art fair, the Berlin-based Functional Art Gallery shook things up. Typically, galleries at any art fair are either design (furniture or lighting) or art (paintings and sculptures). Rarely do they ever cover both. [The \(Functional\) Art of This Century](#) blurs the line, with a series of chairs that point to reusable materials as the future of art and design-making. As the gallery's founder Benoît Wolfrom explains: "The art world is asking, 'How do we reduce our carbon footprint?' But the younger generation are using what they have access to, and is asking themselves, 'How do we move on as a civilization?'"

All of the works here are made by recycled materials. Among them, a sturdy chair made of cardboard pulp is created by OrtaMiklos, while Donna Huano and Theophile Blandet made a plastic chair from parts an industrial factory. Artist [Leo Orta](#) created a lion dog chair from 1990s landline phones and foam. "Young artists and designers don't even think about making environmental art, they're already there," said Wolfrom.

Climate Meltdown



How Dare You. Photograph: Rubem Robierb

One of the most compelling artworks during Miami artwork is at a hotel, oddly enough. The Brazilian artist Rubem Robierb has created a melting ice sculpture inspired by the climate emergency speech Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old Swedish environmental activist, recently gave at the United Nations. The words “How Dare You,” carved out of two tons of ice, and stretching 36ft, floated across the pool at the Shore Club South Beach, before melting. The goal, says the artist, is to confront the old systems of living, which are being met with frustration by a younger generation. This artwork only lasted eight hours, though. The point? “I was impressed by Greta Thunberg’s powerful and courageous speech at the UN – when I saw it, I knew I had to do something about our planet, said Robierb. “My mission as an artist is to open difficult conversations. Climate change is the biggest issue of all time because it affects every living being on our planet.”