

The New York Times

In Miami Beach, the Art Scene Has Moved Outdoors

Even though it's not playing host to Art Basel this year, the city is still putting on a show, most of it outdoors.



Jillian Mayer's sculpture at The Confidante hotel. The artist is just one of prominent names placing pieces outdoors this year.

By Joseph B. Treaster

Dec. 1, 2020, 5:02 a.m. ET

MIAMI BEACH — Jillian Mayer, a Miami sculptor, filmmaker and performance artist, looks

forward to early December when Art Basel Miami Beach usually fills the streets with tens of thousands of art lovers from around the world.

“I love it,” she said. “The energy. The excitement.”

Ms. Mayer, 36, has shown her work in the event’s flashy exhibition center, celebrated at the sparkling parties and met up with artists and collectors from just about everywhere.

But with Art Basel going online this year because of the pandemic, there will be no big parties. No rivers of Champagne. No squadrons of private jets. Ms. Mayer is shifting to a quieter scene: She is showing a sculpture at one of 10 hotels the city has organized into a kind of pop-up, open-air museum, tailored to a time of face masks and social distancing.

“We’re not going to be the center of the art world this December,” said Dan Gelber, the mayor of Miami Beach. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t celebrate art in a meaningful way.”



Ms. Mayer at The Confidante hotel. She is showing a sculpture at one of 10 hotels the city has organized into a kind of pop-up, open-air museum.

The hotels — Art Deco and modern ones with Art Deco flourishes — are mostly clustered in about a dozen blocks of South Beach, set up like the galleries of a museum. There's an installation at this one, a mural at another, with sculpture over there. Instead of clustering in air-conditioned rooms, much of the art is displayed on breezy patios and rooftops, on outside walls and in loggias.

The city began developing the exhibition, which it calls "No Vacancy," more than two years ago as a way to perk up business in the off-season. When the pandemic came along, it seemed just right, said Brandi Reddick, Miami Beach's manager of cultural affairs.

"No Vacancy" is the centerpiece of a week of special events in the city, the combined efforts of museums, hotels, the New World Symphony, the botanical gardens and other cultural institutions. It runs through Dec. 12.

The city is spending \$150,000 on "No Vacancy," Ms. Reddick said, most of it in \$10,000 payments for each of the artists and for two prizes, one of \$20,000, the other of \$5,000. In a normal year, she said, Art Basel generates about \$16 million for Miami Beach and nearby Miami, the host of many related art fairs.

This year, the city's hotels were "kneecapped by the pandemic," Mr. Gelber said, closed for several months in the spring. Since June they have been limping along.

"We're trying to sustain the hotels and preserve our art and cultural profile," he said. "But safety comes first. We're not trying to build crowds."

Besides the hotel art, the city and the Bass Museum of Art have created Art Outside, a walking tour of two dozen public art sculptures, murals and installations, mostly near the museum in Collins Park.

On Lincoln Road, Miami Beach's elegant outdoor pedestrian mall, the Miami New Drama theater company is performing a set of seven new one-act plays, "Seven Deadly Sins," in vacant storefronts and on the loading dock of the company's Colony Theater at Lenox Avenue, according to Michel Hausmann, the company's co-founder and artistic director.

Small, widely spaced audiences, wearing headsets, will sit under the stars, watching actors perform behind the store windows. Each store is home to one act of about 10 minutes; at the curtain, the audience moves to the next store and the actors start again.

But much of the focus will be on the visual arts. Ms. Mayer is showing her work on a coral stone patio at The Confidante, a hotel on Collins Avenue.

Her sculpture, made of fiberglass, lumber and cardboard cartons, suggests a fanciful jungle gym. Ladderlike steps lead to a flat rooftop covering a big archway, windows and shelves. A slide curves around one end of the installation. Ms. Mayer has built in a small, solar-powered light and a cup holder with a tall bottle of hand sanitizer. She calls it "Fort."

"It might remind you of a child's fort," she said. "But it's an artist's interpretation of a place of refuge — a refuge from harsh rains, blowing wind or sea-level rise, anything that might hurt humans."

The Confidante is also displaying 23 lithographs and bronze reproductions of work by Salvador Dalí and 20 paintings and sculptures by Miami artists inspired by him.



Federico Uribe with some of his pieces at the Hotel Croydon.

Nearby, at the Hotel Croydon, Federico Uribe, 58, a Colombian sculptor who lives in Miami, is displaying his animals — a panda with her cub, a small bear and two foxes, all made of spent bullet casings.

Birgit Rathsmann, 45, a German video artist and animator living in Brooklyn, is projecting a compressed black-and-white video of an entire season of satellite hurricane footage, all swirls and quivering loops, on the facade of the Avalon Hotel on Ocean Drive.



Kerry Phillips' art installation at the Hyatt

Two of the artists, Kerry Phillips, 46, a Texas transplant, and Sterling Rook, 36, who grew up in Miami, are showing art made out of things they've found on trash heaps.

In a breezeway on a rooftop with a bar and a pool at the Hyatt Centric South Beach hotel, Ms. Phillips, who also prowls thrift shops, has put together an installation of broken-down furniture, like wooden chairs; mirrors; a pair of tufted, gold velvet headboards; old lamps and discarded jars.



Sterling Rook's piece, using woven palm leaves, framing the entrance at the Rivera Hotel South Beach.

Mr. Rook has framed the entrance to the Rivera Hotel South Beach with an arch of woven palm leaves, the discards of tree trimmers.

He usually paints his weavings with a rainbow of pastels and bright colors. But this time, he said, he chose shades of blue.

“Blue has a calming effect,” he said. “It’s time for calming effects in the world. We’re living in a heightened state of anxiety. I feel blue is called for.”