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A Miami Gallerist Weighs in on 2020's Virtual Art Basel

FEATURED, MIAMI DESIGN DISTRICT



Miami's latest gallery in the Design District's Melin Building resulted from a bit of kismet, courtesy of Dacra Development CEO Craig Robins, David Castillo says. "I had been on Lincoln Road [in Miami Beach] for six years, but when that lease was ending, I knew the Design District was where I wanted to be," Castillo explains.

“When I approached Craig, he told me about the space he recently had used to show his personal collection. It was absolutely, literally perfect.”

The gallery’s opening show, “In These Shadows,” featured New York-based multimedia artist Lyle Ashton Harris, whose work is included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. And with the Design District’s Institute of Contemporary Art hosting “*Ektachrome Archive*,” a solo exhibition of Harris’s photographs and journals, through May 2021, Castillo believes destiny may have played a role here as well.

“‘In These Shadows’ was supposed to open months ago, but it was delayed by the pandemic,” Castillo notes. “Now it feels organic that both were so close to each other and opened at the same time, but it was simply pure luck.” Even amid pandemic restrictions, Castillo says “In These Shadows” was well-received by his virtual and in-person guests, while a virtual conversation between Harris and art historian Richard Powell attracted enough online visitors to become “one of our most popular and visible artist talks to date,” he adds.



Since he opened his first Miami gallery in 2005, Castillo has been devoted to showing work that historically had been excluded from narratives and opportunities, “ground-breaking artists who address powerful questions; it is necessary to create platforms that engage these meaningful and culturally relevant conversations,” he says. Since 2016 Castillo has presented solo exhibitions showcasing buzzworthy artists like Pepe Mar, Christina Quarles, Sanford Biggers, and Shinique Smith, while he’s also been a major presence during Art Basel Miami’s evolving status as one of the world’s premier art fairs. He was unsurprised, however, by the event’s cancellation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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“Hong Kong had been canceled first, followed by Switzerland,” Castillo says of the Art Basel events in those locations. “With the reality of Florida and the pandemic in general, it didn’t make any sense that there would be this large congregation of globetrotters descending from the art world into Miami. So what I suspected ultimately would be the case: We’ll do it virtually.”

Galleries and auction houses around the globe indeed have excelled at pivoting to virtual events over the past eight months. Virtual exhibitions and sales are now commonplace, while salespeople and gallery owners alike have been upping their tech skills to host online consultations with valued clients. Castillo says Design District galleries also adapted quickly, and thanks to his healthy client list, he was busy over the summer. “Fortunately, after 16 years, the gallery has its followers, and we made sales to museums and private collectors,” he notes. “People have embraced communicating more and more virtually, and the art world has been no exception to that.”



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Through January 31, 2021, Castillo presented both virtual and on-site exhibitions of work by Vaughn Spann, the painter and sculptor whom he calls “one of today’s most sought-after artists.” And while in past years he would have mounted an Art Basel group show at the Miami Beach Convention Center, Castillo says Robins once again stepped in with an ideal solution, offering up a temporary space not far from his Melin Building gallery. “Craig is an internationally known art collector, and he’s very supportive of artists and local galleries. He really spearheaded the neighborhood effort to offer temporary spaces so artists could have a platform during this time.”

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While the status of in-person Art Basel events throughout the world remains tentative for 2021, Castillo says he is optimistic about not only the success of a largely virtual Art Basel Miami this year, but also how artists are likely to respond to 2020’s chaotic times. “Virtual visibility has already worked for a lot of galleries—records have been broken during the pandemic,” he says. “As someone who has studied art history for a long time, when you look at civilization, culture, art—all of those things have a forward motion, and have inspired creative people. New stories will be spun out of this, great stories, and decades from now, the art created today will tell historians about this moment.”

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