

David Castillo Makes the Jump to Art Basel's Swiss Fair, a Rarity for a Miami Gallery

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David Castillo. PHOTO MATEO SERNA ZAPATA.

The Art Basel brand is a powerful thing. Its presence in Miami has arguably helped transform the city into a thriving arts hub. In the nearly two decades since the fair descended on South Florida, Miami's museums have matured, its collectors have pioneered a new model of private museums open to the public, and its galleries have developed strong programs.

Despite Art Basel's impact on the city, the influence doesn't seem to run both ways: a Miami-based gallery has never exhibited at the fair's Swiss edition, often considered by many to be its most important one, until now.

Enter David Castillo Gallery, a longtime participant in the Miami Beach fair whose founding in 2005 came three years after Art Basel's launch there. This year's iteration of the Swiss Art Basel marks the first time the gallery will take part in the main event.

Since its inauguration, David Castillo Gallery has helped develop a range of closely watched artists, taking Xaviera Simmons and Sanford Biggers early on and later adding Lyle Ashton Harris and Shinique Smith to the roster. Looking back on it nearly two decades later, it may seem like a foregone conclusion that this homegrown gallery would be among the city's most successful, but its founder, David Castillo, would politely disagree.

"Today, you might look at the gallery and say, 'Oh, wow, a lot of these artists are very successful,'" he told *ARTnews* in an interview ahead of the fair, which opens to VIPs on Tuesday. "The perfect word to describe it is organic because I didn't have such an advanced plan, like you sometimes see in the art world today, where things sometimes feel expected. There was no crystal ball because I didn't know what would resonate with others."

Noah Horowitz, Art Basel's current CEO and the former head of the Miami fair, said Castillo's gallery "always stood out from the crowd, and was one of the first programs in the city to really move the needle in terms of ambition and vision. ... From the very early days, his program had a distinct focus on queer artists and artists of color—which today feels prescient. His approach to working with artists has always been earnest and genuine, truly dedicated to elevating undiscovered voices and putting them on the map."

Castillo never predicted this path for his gallery—or even for himself. When he was an undergraduate student at Yale University, he was on the pre-med track, thinking he needed to study something that would have "practical application for a career," he said. But taking an art history course would prove consequential, reminding him of his childhood love for museums.



Installation view of "Searching for Love and Fire," 2005, the first exhibition at David Castillo Gallery.
COURTESY DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY.

Castillo's first jobs in the art world included working under American decorative arts curator Patricia Kane, who at the time was writing a book on colonial Massachusetts silversmiths, at the Yale University Art Gallery and as the first registrar at what was then the Miami Art Museum, which owned only 60 works at the time, according to Castillo. (That institution is now the Pérez Art Museum Miami, and it currently owns more than 1,800 pieces.)

In the late '90s, Castillo slowly built up his network. He met collectors who asked him to do research on some of the works they owned. That led to conversations about selling the pieces, and eventually, through New York galleries, he began placing works by modern and postwar artists like Picasso, Dubuffet, Kahlo, Rivera, and de Kooning. "At the time," Castillo said, these were priced in "the low hundreds of thousands to several hundreds of thousands, and today would be millions of dollars," he said. He said he amassed a reputation for having "access to key works," and did just that for about 10 years.

Soon, however, Castillo realized that he wanted to represent living artists. "There wasn't a roadmap, like 'I'm going to show these artists or this on trend, or what people might buy,'" he said. "In fact, I was met with nothing but pure criticism at the beginning. People said, 'Oh, well, you're showing women artists, African American artists, and Latinx artists. Who's going to buy this work?' Literally, people said that to me."



Installation view of "Paris, Barcelona, Miami," 2006, at David Castillo Gallery. COURTESY DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY

One of the gallery's earliest shows, "Paris, Barcelona, Miami" in 2006, featured a site-specific work by Quisqueya Henriquez, the gallery's first artist, along with early pieces by modernists like Wifredo Lam, Amelia Peláez, and Fidelio Ponce de Leon, which Castillo had been able to secure through his previous background working on the secondary market. But, Castillo recalled, when people entered the gallery, then in Miami's Wynwood neighborhood, visitors were so confused by the presence of these modernist works, they thought they had to have been copies or replicas. "People just assumed you can't have that in this place," Castillo said. "They didn't know what to think."

Never interested in pursuing trends or working with artists just because their work might sell, Castillo said he “never had any evidence that what I was doing would really generate money. All I knew is that I believed in the premise of what I was doing. I was excited by the intellectual concept of it.”

That has led to success for his artists over the years, with important surveys of their work and acquisitions by institutions like the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, as well as “every institution in South Florida,” he said.



David Castillo and Xaviera Simmons after a talk. PHOTO MATEO SERNA ZAPATA

Even as the artists he represents grow in renown, both nationally and internationally, there is a loyalty that Castillo’s artists have to the gallery; they continue to be represented by Castillo and present new work for solo shows at the Miami gallery. “I think that’s because we have this long trajectory where I was able to provide that platform at a time when there really wasn’t a platform or there wasn’t really any keen interest,” Castillo said. Artists who had early support from Castillo and have since departed the roster include Christina Quarles.

After 11 years in his initial space in the Wynwood district, Castillo decided it was time to move on, as the neighborhood had “lost the early character of being an art-focused place,” he said. “That transformation was no longer conducive to the type of business that is an art gallery; people want easy access, and they want it to be enjoyable. The moment the location becomes an obstacle to seeing the art, it no longer works.”

He moved first to Lincoln Road, near the Miami Beach Convention Center, where Art Basel takes place each year. He had signed a 10-year lease, with an option to decide whether to re-sign or not after five years. Then Covid hit, and “Lincoln Road became desolate.”

So, Castillo decided to move to a space in the Design District, back in Miami proper, where real estate developer and collector Craig Robbins, a client of Castillo's, had previously shown his collection and where out-of-town galleries had hosted pop-ups during the fair. ("The next phase, he said, "is owning a building.")



Installation view of "Lyle Ashton Harris: In these shadows," 2020, the first exhibition in David Castillo's Design District space.

Castillo's trajectory with Art Basel has been a slow boil. His first outing there was in 2008, with a solo booth for Quisqueya Henriquez in the fair's Positions section for emerging galleries. It wasn't until 2018 that he made the jump to the fair's main Galleries section. In this year's Swiss fair, Castillo will dedicate his booth to the work of the late Cuban artist Belkis Ayón, who is known for her large-scale prints of a secret, all-male Afro-Cuban society called Abakuá. (She was featured in the main exhibition of the 2022 Venice Biennale, in a gallery of the main show that also featured a Golden Lion-winning Simone Leigh sculpture.)

The works in the booth, which have not been previously exhibited, are done in black and gray tones, with figures, many of them mouthless, who have an eerie but powerful presence.

"This very rare presentation that David proposed just made sense to the Committee, as it's exceptionally focused and curatorially rich, as well as being genuine to his program," Horowitz, Art Basel's CEO, said. "It also reflects an important shift in the art world in which younger, mid-sized galleries are no longer only responsible for introducing emerging artists to the market, but can also be at the vital helm of repositioning artists that were previously overlooked."

Castillo is the only gallery to work with the estate since the artist's death in 1999, and the showing is one of the few times her work has been exhibited in a commercial context. But the works on view at the fair are not available. Other Ayón works may be at a later date.

"It hasn't ever been primarily about the sales, because there aren't a ton of works to be sold," he said. "It's about how you have helped to preserve such an important artist's legacy."



From left, Belkis Ayón: *Desobediencia (Disobedience)*, 1998, and *Resurrección (Resurrection)*, 1998.
COURTESY THE ESTATE OF BELKIS AYÓN AND DAVID CASTILLO

In the eight years he's worked with the estate, he's sold maybe 10 works. The main focus has been bringing attention to the artist by helping to organize exhibitions, publishing a monograph, and placing the few available pieces in major museum collections.

"That definitely has some commercial value, even though you're not selling the work on the spot," he said. In Basel, it's more a matter of having "the right set of eyes, at the right time on an artist's work," he said.

Castillo continued, "It's full circle because I didn't know when the first time I would get into Art Basel would be. The odds for that to be the case were stacked against him. And so here I am, the child of immigrants from Cuba, and then the first artist I get to show in the most important art fair in the world is a Cuban artist."