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News & Features

By Christopher Palmeri

Snap and Sizzle at Art Basel/Miami

The cutting-edge expo just gets bigger -- and pricier -- every year. And the interest is spilling over to a new crop of competing shows

I'm not familiar with abstract expressionist Stuart Davis' work. But when I saw one of the late artist's brightly colored paintings shortly after entering the Miami Beach Convention Center, I had to ask the gallery representative how much it cost. "Two million eight hundred thousand dollars," she said, pronouncing each word so emphatically my friend said she sounded like Austin Powers' nemesis Dr. Evil trying to blackmail the free world.

It may seem odd to see multimillion dollar pieces of art being hawked at a convention center normally reserved for boat shows and boxing matches, but Art Basel/Miami Beach, the six-day art extravaganza that ended on Dec. 4 is undeniably a hit. A spin-off of a long-running show in Switzerland, the Miami version is now in its fourth year, and many attendees said this was the biggest and most successful yet, with many galleries reporting record sales.

Art Basel proved that contemporary art is hotter than a summer day in Miami and that collectors are increasingly comfortable shelling out big bucks at events like Basel and the annual Armory Art Show held in New York in March. Houston artist Jeff Shore says he sold two of his \$10,000 video installations, which feature images of small rooms filling up with rocks, within hours of setting one up. "These aren't lookers and wine drinkers," says Eleanor Williams of San Antonio's Finesilver gallery. "These are serious buyers."

SWIFT TURNOVER. Signs of wealth were everywhere, from the lines of private jets at Miami International Airport to the chauffeur-driven BMWs used to shuttle VIPs around the city. UBS (UBS), a major sponsor of the show, hosted a Collector's Lounge at the convention center, while caterers pushed carts of champagne for sale in the main hall. A single-day admission ticket cost a reasonable \$22, well worth it considering the hundreds of pieces on display. More than 600 galleries applied for the 195 spaces at the show. About \$2 billion worth of art was available for sale, with the asking prices for some pieces reaching eight figures.

Demand was so brisk that gallery owners said they found themselves putting up new pieces on their wall two or three times during the show. Another said his gallery raised the prices of items that were selling well in the course of the week.

Well-known galleries from around the world occupied large spaces at the main entrance, offering museum-quality pieces by art superstars such as Joan Miro, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. Chicago's Richard Gray Gallery was selling a rudimentary drawing of a horse pulling a cart, done by an 18-year-old up-and-comer named Pablo Picasso in 1898. The asking price: \$350,000. A very pleasant staffer from London's Waddington Galleries explained to me that sculptor Barry Flanagan's giant bronze Leaping Hare on Crescent & Hill was exactly 12 feet high, the legal limit for outdoor sculpture in hurricane-prone Miami.

TASTE OF MOMMY. There was enough to see to keep even non-art lovers entertained. Vancouver artist Brian Jungen's *Portable Still* consisted of a beer keg in a baby stroller. "Not art, but a really good idea," said another friend of mine. The asking price on that was \$18,000. His Windsor (Ontario) countryman Iain Baxter tried to explain the meaning of one his pieces, a flashing neon sign that read "Masturbating Life Makes Art." "That's what art is all about," Baxter said. "That's what we do."

One of the most popular exhibits was a booth sponsored by New York City-based publishing house Visionaire. It was selling an album of "tastes" chosen by 12 artists and celebrities. The tastes came in small packages similar to Listerine breath strips. Yoko Ono's contribution, *Mommy*, tasted like condensed milk. Photographer Bruce Weber's *Youth* tasted like cherry licorice. Surfer Laird Hamilton's *Power* tasted like sea spray and sweat. The albums sold for \$175.

Art Basel/Miami Beach has become so popular that a string of competing shows has popped up. These include Aqua Miami and Scope, where galleries show work in hotel rooms, and Art Positions -- 20 younger galleries showing their art in cargo containers down the street from the convention center. One of them, Moscow's XL Gallery, had a large video installation of men dressed in black pants and white shirts running across a large screen. Guests could stomp these "artists" with large metallic feet controlled with foot pedals.

CINE-NAZIS. The smaller shows had more reasonably priced art. That's due to simple economics. Booths at the convention center cost \$50,000 and up, while similar space at another show ran \$10,000. "I can offer a lot more pieces selling for \$10,000 or less because I don't have the overhead," says New York gallery owner Penny Pilkington, who set up shop at Pulse, an alternative show. A print at the nearby New Art Dealers Alliance show said it all. All 50 copies of Simon Evans' *Buy Me I'm At An Art Fair* were sold by New York's White Columns Gallery.

Another highlight of the Miami Beach art week is that wealthy locals open their private collections to visitors. Among those on display were Venezuela's Cisneros family collection, which features video installations by Bill Viola and giant photographs by Andrea Gursky, and that of New York real estate investors the Rubells. Their collection

includes a brightly colored fiberglass reproduction of the State of Liberty by Keith Haring and a 1998 work by Piotr Uklanski that consisted of 164 images of celebrities playing Nazis on screen, everyone from Clint Eastwood to Ronald Reagan.

"It just keeps getting bigger and bigger every year," collector Jason Rubell says of the show. Contemporary art, he says, "speaks to what's happening now."

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