

Politics and Commerce Collide at Art Basel Miami Beach

By JASON FARAGO DECEMBER 2, 2016



Howardena Pindell, *Untitled*, 1972–1973, acrylic on canvas, 90 1/4 x 105 1/2 inches

Even the small talk was more solemn at this year’s edition of Art Basel Miami Beach. On opening day of what is America’s largest fair of contemporary art and Champagne-steeped hedonism, the air kisses were shadowed by the challenges the presidency of Donald J. Trump might pose to an art world that likes to imagine itself as a force for progress.

At Wednesday’s V.I.P. preview, more sedate than the running-of-the-bulls ambience of years past, gallerists and curators spoke in apocalyptic terms about America after Jan. 20, while the collectors — some lightly espoused social liberalism and ecological commitments aside — were sanguine about the fate of the art market. If Mr. Trump’s plutocratic cabinet choices are any guide, the rich who buy art here might soon pay even less tax than they do now. (The nominee for Treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin, is the son of the art dealer Robert Mnuchin, whose gallery’s booth was heavily trafficked.)

Art Basel, which closes Sunday, offers a chance to see works from around the world — most importantly from Latin America, home to 31 of the 269 galleries exhibiting here. But several American galleries have rejiggered their booths in response to the unexpected election of Nov. 8, or else are showing slightly older works that have taken on new, grimmer airs.

On the booth of the Los Angeles dealer Susanne Vielmetter, a large, stern portrait in pencil by Karl Haendel depicts Hillary Clinton, lips pursed and eyes gazing skyward, as one-half of a diptych; the other half is solid, light-sucking black. Gladstone Gallery, from New York, is showing a painting by Elizabeth Peyton of Barack Obama, dating to 2008. Then a young senator from Illinois, Mr. Obama stands before a washy background of blue-and-gray stripes, but Ms. Peyton’s adoring, soft-hued portrait appears shatteringly sad now that the promise so many saw has been annulled.

And for Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, also from New York, the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija has quickly produced three large, bitter text-based works, each stenciled on pages of *The New York Times* from the day after the election. The works each bear a bleak, ambiguously narrated statement: “THE TYRANNY OF COMMON SENSE HAS REACHED ITS FINAL STAGE.” After years when artists and curators have mystically insisted that contemporary art could have instant, magical political benefits, I’ll take a little fatalism.

I shouldn’t oversell the dourness. Art Basel is still Art Basel, and Miami, mis *compañeros*, is still Miami. The sun is shining, the Ubers are surge-priced, the yacht companies are hosting cocktail parties, and Chaka Khan is singing at Soho House. The intensely air-conditioned aisles of the Miami Beach Convention Center feature enough seven-figure art to decorate all your country houses, though one blue-chip gallery that has tacked to a more historical presentation is Galerie Gmurzynska, from Zurich, which has mounted a large display of art of the early Soviet avant-garde. An arresting photcollage from Gustav Klutsis, a great Latvian graphic artist who was executed on Stalin’s orders, features a hammer and sickle atop masses of workers. The book cover designs of Varvara Stepanova, dating to 1919, consist of boldly swashed watercolor crosses, ringed with peppy Cyrillic lettering.

There are other strong historical presentations. A cross section of works by Man Ray, ranging from photographs of his fellow Surrealists to a swank chess set, can be seen on the booth of New York’s sedulous Dada specialist Francis M. Naumann. And a mini-show of three all-over, pointillist abstractions from the early 1970s by Howardena Pindell, on the booth of New York’s Garth Greenan Gallery, offers an extraordinary chromatic indulgence; fields of mauve and seafoam are composed of thousands and thousands of individually inked dots, prefiguring the works she would later create with paper chad. (Ms. Pindell is one of several African-American abstract painters now enjoying belated and deserved attention, and she was on hand in the booth, beaming.)

As usual at Art Basel Miami, it’s Latin American galleries, particularly the Brazilian and Mexican ones, which have the most to offer to visitors who think of art as more than a class of assets. Bergamin & Gomide, from São Paulo, is displaying paintings and works on paper by familiar names like Lygia Pape, but also by Brazilian modernists less attested in Western museums, like Judith Lauand, whose geometric compositions pared Concretism down to its most minimal elements, and Alfredo Volpi, who painted faint, woozy-edged abstractions that are as tantalizing as Ms. Lauand’s are exacting. Works by Volpi are also to be found on the booth of the Rio gallery A Gentil Carioca, while São Paulo’s Galeria Leme is presenting trenchant works by Jaime Lauriano, one of the most thoughtful artists of Brazil’s young and diversifying scene, whose graceful silk-screened images of strange contraptions turn out to be colonial-era instruments of torture.

Latin American art is also in focus at the Pérez Art Museum, across Biscayne Bay in Miami proper, which features a large and hallucinogenic retrospective of the Argentine-born, French-based artist Julio Le Parc. A pioneer of Op and kinetic art, Mr. Le Parc tripped out with colorful paintings, like a panorama of groovy rainbow stripes that would not look out of place on the set of “The Price Is Right,” but also spotlit mobiles, walk-through mirrored installations and streamers attached to a wind machine that blows at the touch of a button. The show is a feat of scenography, though its fun house atmosphere may leave you wondering if every single tendency of the 1960s really needs our reassessment, or whether some movements have petered out for cause.

The more surprising and satisfying museum retrospective is at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, an institution that scythed off a few years ago from the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami and will move into a permanent facility next year. For now, in a temporary space in the Design District, the ICA has put together a superb retrospective of the German artist Thomas Bayrle, whose stuttering paintings, photcollages and films, most of which examine systems of transport and urbanism, deserve wider American attention. A professor at Frankfurt’s Städelschule, Mr. Bayrle has spent decades depicting cities and people as aggregations of hundreds of repeated parts, which he can now do easily via Photoshop but long performed by hand. His visions of oversaturated cities offer lots to think about when stopped dead in Basel traffic on the Venetian Causeway.