



# CRITIC'S VIEW: Art Basel Miami Beach - Happy Days are Here Again

December 6, 2014

by James Croak

The winter solstice brings with it the massive annual gathering of world-class art fairs and events centered along the strip of art deco structures and glittering night life of Miami Beach Florida. As the geese fly south for the winter so do the glitterati by the tens of thousands to attend this evermore sprawling bellweather of ideas and style covering visual art, design, and increasingly other areas of the fine arts.

What began in 2002 as a modest American offshoot of a popular art fair in the Swiss-German border town of Basel has now expanded into a seven day potpourri known as Miami Art Week and held each year somewhere around December 1-7. This year the hotels are filled and the restaurants are packed, with an improving economy and good weather sales are reportedly brisk.

Its adherents seemed to have acquired a private language as the attendees chatter excitedly about something seen at Pulse, Scope, NADA, Spectrum, Pinta, or Red Dot, all names of satellite fairs scattered about the Miami Beach barrier island and across its high-speed bridges to the Wynwood district of Miami which hosts the equally large and exciting Art Miami.

I doubt anyone has managed a nose count of galleries that participate in this seven day Saturnalia but the Art Basel and Art Miami fairs alone boast 350 galleries from about the globe. Probably just as many venues populate the other pop up fairs across this sun bleached tidal flat.

The Art Basel Miami Beach, the main fair, is as upbeat as ever as the economy shakes off its multi-year doldrums and is crammed full of expensive, shiny, and highly crafted objects; highly machine-crafted objects to be more exact; if there was anything missing it is the evidence of the human hand drawing or painting. This culture was *vieux jeu* twenty years ago, but now its absence is palpable. Disinterest in that culture has firmed in dislike and almost none was to be found.

High craft is evidenced by amazing castings and carvings to be found everywhere in the show—none quite equal the stunning and massive chrome *Balloon Dogs* by Jeff Koons at the Whitney Museum— but still there were castings, carvings and fabrications that indicated huge investment on someone's part. Art today is expected to take a crew to build and have a Medici in the background to plop down the gold coinage.

Top of list of beautiful carvings is Paul McCarthy's *White Snow, Bambi (Working Title)*, a ten-foot high walnut sculpture from 2013 that greets attendees entering ABMB. This is a souvenir of the much larger Grimms Brothers tale installation that McCarthy and his son Damon McCarthy installed at the Park Ave Armory exhibit in 2013. That *Gesamtkunstwerk* was so raunchy that no one under

seventeen was allowed to see it. A bedtime story that tells too much about what goes on in bed?



“White Snow, Bambi” by Paul McCarthy, 2013. Black Walnut, 120 x 74 x 61 inches. Hauser & Wirth, New York. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.



“White Snow, Bambi” by Paul McCarthy, 2013. Black Walnut, 120 x 74 x 61 inches. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

An off the wall hilarious and captivating street culture work is a hoodie that was sent to a body shop to be “repaired.” This immensely clever work by American Ara Dymond brings together a host of subcultures: auto customization shops, African-American youth culture and others. The hoodie, a preferred youth pullover that conceals identity, has been so maligned recently that Representative Bobby Rush wore one on the house floor to expose the bias after the George Zimmerman shooting of the hooded Trayvon Martin.



Bobby Rush on C-Span.

In Dymond’s send up the hoodie has all its wrinkles and grooves remove, as in a car crash repair and is smoothed out with silver body primer paint. It’s nothing if not funny!



“Surviving The Pinocchio Locomotive”  
Silver as Tee Shirt Design by Ara Dymond,  
2014. Cotton, resin, automotive fillers,  
enamel paints, steel, plexi glass,  
polyethylene and sand, 91 x 30 x 25  
inches. Mother’s Tankstation, Dublin. Photo  
by Kathy Zeiger.

One of the last remaining minimalist formalist sculptors has been Bombay born Anish Kapoor who continued this craft for decades after it got sent packing by the performance culture of the seventies. One wonders what sustained Kapoor emotionally during this time but the quality of his sculpture in this genre is the best to be found anywhere. A couple of pieces on display use his clever technique of injecting extra catalyst at the center of a curing block of casting resin to cause it to bubble and fracture in small area within the block giving it an outer space Stanley Kubrick A Space Odyssey feel to it as if we were watching a time warp forming in front of our eyes.



“Title to be determined” by Anish Kapoor, 2013. Acrylic, 19.69 x 15.75. 15.75 inches. Kamel Mennour, Paris. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

Another show stopper was his black fun house mirror that flipped the viewer on his head with some invisible and hard to fathom optics.



“Untitled” by Anish Kapoor, 2008. Mirrored plexi glass, 58 7/8 x 81 1/8 x 19 3/4 inches. Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

There was some video on hand but less than other years, the new age gushy imagery of Bill Viola giving way to some more immediate and plausible imagery as seen in Los Angeles based filmmaker Brian Bress’ serial monitors where goofy stovepipe puppets painted white are seen to be staring out from their electronic room and drawing Picasso bull like imagery on their side of the screen. Like much of the work on view at Art Basel, it engaged with humor and was uplifting in spirit.



“Firemen #2 (on blue, green and purple lines) by Brian Bress, 2014. High definition on three-channel video (color), High definition monitors and players, wall mounts, framed, 3-part, Ed. of 1 + AP, 37.75 x 73.5 x 4 inches installed. 16 min. 22 sec loop. Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

Galeria Leme from Sao Paulo has a beautiful arte povera piece, a rather stunning one actually, that defines this unique culture wherein artist Alexandre Brandao fills some ordinary lunch bags with damp graphite which creeps up the walls of the paper bags creating a beautiful mountainous landscape. Art made from nothing and found in the most unexpected of places, a true visual poet.



“Mêmore” by Alexandre Brandão, 2014. Filter paper, glue, pigment, water, Variable dimensions.

Large photographs were popular as another form of machine-made art and in evidence were huge prints from the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf school of working by two of its graduates, Germans Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth. These 1970's students added modern technical ability to the 1920's German school of New Objectivity as promoted by their mutual teachers Bernd and Hilla Becher who bland images of water towers and coal bunkers demystified photography into something more present and banal.



Artwork by Andreas Gursky. Sprüth Magers Berlin London. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.



“Pitheads” by Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, 1974.

On the opposite end of the antiseptic and anti-personal imagery of these Teutonic photographers we have a touching sculpture by Elmgreen & Dragset entitled *The Experiment*. A young boy poses in front of a mirror in high heels while wearing lipstick, an early sorting of one's sexual identity. It is at once a curiosity and an object of sympathy, a private moment in a young persons life. .



“The Experiment” by Elmgreen & Dragset. Photo by Kathy Zeiger.

**BASIC FACTS:** Art Basel Miami Beach takes place from December 4 – 7, 2014 at the Miami Beach Convention Center, 1901 Convention Center Dr, Miami Beach, FL 33139. [www.artbasel.com](http://www.artbasel.com).

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