

# Talking With: Katelijne De Backer Discusses Art Fairs

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by Pat Rogers

Katelijne De Backer knows art fairs. Spending around 12 years as Executive Director of The Armory Show and leading the charge (and change) from The Armory's long-standing location at 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue to the [Piers](#) (92/94) in 2001. Under her leadership, [The Armory Show](#) transformed from a "bohemian-style fair" of 75 galleries to a must-attend art fair on the international art fair circuit.

Soon after the move, De Backer decided it was time for her to move too. She leapt in 2011, temporarily, onto the gallery side, as Managing Director for [Lehmann Maupin](#). Returning to the art fair arena in 2013, she was tapped by [Scope Miami](#) to transform its fair, increase the overall quality, and position them as a serious contender in the competitive Miami art fair market as Director of Exhibitor Relations.

Now, De Backer faces another art fair challenge: Making sure Art Miami New York shines bright during Frieze Week in New York as its first Director.

Pat Rogers of [Hamptons Art Hub](#) caught up with Katelijne De Backer while Art Miami New York prepared for its move into Pier 94—a familiar location for De Backer from her Armory Days. In a phone interview and in the following email exchange, De Backer ruminated on art fairs, their history, what it's like to launch a new art fair in New York City, and what visitors can expect for [Art Miami New York's](#) inaugural edition.

**HAH!: Art Miami New York is a new fair debuting during Frieze Week 2015. What attracted you to accept the position as its director?**

**KD:** Art Miami is one of the longest running and important international art fairs in the United States, and I was attracted to a brand that is so well-respected and has brought recognition to Miami for over 25 years. Galleries, collectors and institutions rely on the fair's rich tradition, superior quality, and excellent organization, and I was eager to join and bring my more than 10 years experience working as director of The Armory Show at the Piers to the team.

**HAH!: You have a long history in art fair production. How have art fairs changed over the years?**

**KD:** When I started working for The Armory Show, there were not that many art fairs, and there was definitely no textbook on how to run an art fair. Together with the founders, Pat Hearn, Collin

de Land, Paul Morris and Matthew Marks, who were all art dealers, we produced a fair that was fun and bohemian. The organization improved over the years and many components were added (collaborations with local collectors, art institutions, artist studios, foreign consulates, etc.). Currently, as art fair director, you not only oversee the entire production, you also help curate the fair, make sure the fair stays true to its mission, and oversee a city-wide art happening.

**HAH!: How are they important in the art world?**

**KD:** Art fairs have become so much more than the commercial event they used to be. They now are cultural happenings; meeting places where collectors, galleries, artists, museum professionals, and art lovers network and discover what's currently going on in the art world.

**HAH!: Art Miami New York brings with it a wealth of art producing experience born from Art Miami and an expansion to the Hamptons, the West Coast, and increased outreach in Miami. Does the familial connection to Art Miami make it easier? Any drawbacks?**

**KD:** Of course it makes it easier, it's one of the reasons why I was happy to join the team. The company manages seven other fairs, including Art Silicon Valley/San Francisco, Art Southampton and Art Miami New York. Many of our collectors and participating galleries from across the country and around the world wanted us to bring a high quality, serious, approachable show to New York during the month of May. To have the support from such a solid company only makes it easier. The drawbacks are that the expectations are high.

**HAH!: How will Art Miami New York compare to Art Miami?**

**KD:** Art Miami New York will stay true to Art Miami's identity and will continue the rich tradition of what it does in Miami. Art Miami New York will have a strong focus on and representation of emergent talent, as well as mid-career cutting-edge artists, anchored by a fresh selection of blue-chip secondary market works by top name artists from the Modern and Post-War eras. It is encouraging, but not surprising, to see that more than half of the selected galleries for New York also participate in the Miami edition. To get the support of these galleries reinforces that they know our organization will deliver. For New York, we also included a group of more edgy, contemporary galleries that will set it apart from Art Miami.

**HAH!: Art Miami New York will be held at Pier 94—the same location where the original Armory Show began. Does it feel like a homecoming for you? In what ways?**

**KD:** Of course, it's a bit like coming home. The fact is, there aren't that many venues big enough and suitable for an art fair in New York City, and it was our goal to stay in Manhattan. The Piers on the Hudson River have a New York industrial feel that many visitors, and especially the out-of-towners, appreciate. To bring contemporary art inside makes sense to me. Of course, Art Miami New York will feel different than The Armory Show. We will use a different layout, to navigate the fair will be different, and the sun will shine!

**HAH!: Do you have a favorite memory from your Armory Show days?**

**KD:** I have many fond Armory Show memories, but I am keeping those for when I publish my

memoirs.

**HAH!: What challenges need to be surmounted for a first-time fair in New York City during an “art fair week”?**

**KD:** Launching an art fair in New York requires a deep knowledge in understanding the potential pitfalls of a very expensive market. The costs to promote the fair as well as public relations, labor and overall production costs are high. The biggest challenge, outside of the expenses, is being heard, and you need to make the audience aware of your presence. But we are confident that we will deliver and that the audience will respond.

**HAH!: How will the inaugural edition of Art Miami New York bear your influence?**

**KD:** Come and see!

**HAH!: What are you looking forward to the most when the doors open on May 14?**

**KD:** That distinguished collectors, important curators and enthusiastic art lovers show up, discover, acquire great art works, and get inspired!



Katelijne De Backer.

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“Talking With: Katelijne De Backer Discusses Art Fairs” is the first in a series of conversations with art world movers and shakers discussing events and issues unfolding in the art world.

Art Miami New York’s inaugural edition is being presented from May 14 – 17, 2015 at Pier 94, 12th Avenue at 55th Street, New York, NY 10019. For details, visit [www.artmiaminewyork.com](http://www.artmiaminewyork.com).

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