



Critic's Picks: Five Outstanding Artworks at Art Basel Miami Beach

December 1, 2016

by Elisa Turner

I spent most of Tuesday, November 29, 2016, roaming the crowded aisles of Art Basel Miami Beach after it opened its doors for press and invited guests. As always, a variety of languages could be heard. Apparent long-time friends greeted each other effusively, as others were preoccupied with intense cell phone conversations. Many snapped digital photos. Others busily tapped on their iPads.

Causing the stir is the art. Quality is paramount at [Art Basel Miami Beach](#) (ABMB) with edgy contemporary video and installation art vying for attention with paintings and sculpture by 20th Century masters. This is, after all, the fair that begat the cultural juggernaut of Miami Art Week.

Hard to believe now, but until Art Basel came to Miami Beach—its first iteration presented outside of Basel, Switzerland—there had never been a major international art event held in the city between Thanksgiving and Christmas. ABMB's art fair predecessor, [Art Miami](#), originally mounted its fair in January. Some even doubted if a late November or early December fair would attract enough attendees to make it work financially.

Art Basel's arrival to Miami Beach was a bumpy one. Originally planned for 2001, the first fair suffered an unexpected and dramatic setback amid elaborate plans and publicity in process. The 9/11 terrorist attacks were fresh and the inaugural Art Basel Miami Beach art fair was postponed for a year. The Miami art community pressed forward with plans already in place and enthusiastically staged a well-received series of events designed to welcome the first Art Basel Miami Beach. The rest of the story, of course, is history.

Following are my five picks for outstanding art I saw at this year's edition of Art Basel Miami Beach, presented in chronological order. These works are a joy and privilege to behold, if you love art for art's sake as this critic does, whether or not the price allows for the addition to your collection. The opportunity to see art works like those on my list is what I love about Art Basel Miami Beach every year.

***Natura Morte* by Giorgio Morandi, 1948**

Galleria d'arte Maggiore, Booth S1



“Still Life” by Giorgio Morandi, 1948. Oil on canvas. Exhibited with Galleria d’Arte Maggiore G.A.M. © Courtesy Galleria d’Arte Maggiore G.A.M., Bologna (Italy).

As with this particular *Natural Morte*, paintings by Italian artist [Giorgio Morandi](#) (1890-1964) are rendered in quiet and subtle tones, ranging often from soft gray and ivory to muted yellow and brown. Morandi focused almost solely on still life paintings, in deceptively plain compositions depicting various arrangements of pitchers, vases, and bowls—humble accoutrements of daily life. They reflect a handsomely understated elegance, all the more striking for its dramatic contrast to what we may think of as Italian, Renaissance-style grandeur and excessive ornamentation.

Morandi’s signature simplicity is very much on display in this lovely still life, with its interconnected composition of pared-down geometric forms, clearly anticipating minimalist abstraction. I have often thought that the Pop art-styled paintings of ordinary pies and cakes—resembling desserts found in cafeterias—by the later American artist [Wayne Thiebaud](#) demonstrate an affinity with Morandi’s paintings. It could even be said that both explore the genre of still life painting to flirt with abstraction. Exhibited by [Galleria d’arte Maggiore](#) (Bologna, Italy).

***Temple of the Word* by Leonora Carrington, 1954**

Mary-Anne Martin Fine Art, Booth D2



“Temple of the Word” by Leonora Carrington, 1954. Oil and gold leaf on canvas. Exhibiting with Mary-Anne Martin Fine Art, Booth D2. Image courtesy of Mary-Anne Martin Fine Art.

Temple of the Word is a glowing, exquisite painting in oil and gold leaf on canvas by [Leonora Carrington](#) offered by [Mary-Anne Martin](#), a leading dealer in Latin American art from New York. Carrington (1917-2011) is a British-born artist who lived and worked for much of her life in Mexico. The painting is beautifully presented as you walk by the booth so it can’t be missed. And with good reason. *Temple of the Word* shows Carrington’s delicately modulated version of Surrealism, with her signature elongated figures appearing to gather for a centuries-old rite. The sense of perspective is outlandishly distorted, revealing her longtime interest in myth and magic.

Scholars have identified the temple-like setting as a reference to ancient Egypt, although the painting is not specifically Egyptian. Rather, it unfolds a mysterious, dream-like narrative, underscored by the diaphanous saffron-colored “curtains” that gently swing behind a pair of peculiar bird-like human figures. Hovering over them is a dazzling, gilded god-like creature, surely about to issue a divine pronouncement. Exhibited [Mary-Anne Martin Fine Art](#) (New York).

***Untitled* by Howardena Pindell, 1972-1973**

Survey Section: Garth Greenan Gallery, Booth S11



“Untitled” by Howardena Pindell, 1972-1973. Acrylic on canvas, 87 1/2 x 90 inches. Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

The widely exhibited African-American artist [Howardena Pindell](#) (b. 1943) painted this *Untitled* not long after she earned an MFA from Yale University in 1967. The work is from the 1970s, when she was living in New York and starting to attract art world attention. Pindell’s art began to reflect Black Power and feminist movements of the time. Her aesthetic was developing: she grew intrigued with using unorthodox materials and with traditional African art she could see in New York museums.

Untitled is an early example reflecting her interest in collaging painting with paper circles gathered by using a common hole-puncher on colored paper. What resulted is a richly colored abstraction, swirling with brilliant light and enigmatic shadows, composed of thousands of dots of color. Most of those dots are made by applying paint over stencils, but others come from the paper “dots” she has added over them. They give the painting an alluring three-dimensional texture. While looking back to French pointillism of the late 19th Century, the work could recall a night sky seen through a high-powered telescope. Nowadays, this painting could even be seen as a metaphor for a universe made up of endless diversity. Exhibited [Garth Greenan Gallery](#) (New York).

***Three Drops* by Carlos Alfonzo, 1988**

Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Booth B14



“Three Drops” by Carlos Alfonzo, 1988. Oil on canvas, 96 x 84 inches. Exhibited with Fredric Snitzer Gallery. Image courtesy of Fredric Snitzer Gallery.

Three Drops by Cuban-born [Carlos Alfonzo](#) (1950-1991) is a splendid example of his glinting abstractions. *Three Drops* may appear frenetic, but closer inspection reveals that this work displays Alfonzo’s finely orchestrated and carefully interconnected sense of composition, replete with spiraling forms and shapes describing eyeballs, tears, and drops of blood. The effect is at once

explosive and intimately engaging.

It was especially difficult for me to take my eyes off this painting. It was painted three years before Alfonzo died of AIDS in Miami in 1991. Sadly, that year he was included in the Whitney Biennial but was not alive to see his work in the prestigious invitational. This painting comes from a period when his reputation was steadily building. His achievement was in the transformation of his chaotic personal experience into poignant art that continues to speak to generations painfully aware of the legacy of violence, oppression, and prejudice. Fleeing a violent and authoritarian Cuba, Alfonzo arrived in Miami during the chaotic Mariel boatlift, in time to witness the many deaths and prejudice in this country wrought by the AIDS epidemic. Exhibited [Fredric Snitzer Gallery](#) (Miami).

***Winged* by Michael Richards, 1999**

Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, Booth A2



“Winged” by Michael Richards, 1999. Bonded bronze and metal, 20 x 38 x 4 inches. Exhibited with Francis M. Naumann Fine Art. Image courtesy of Francis M. Naumann Fine Art.

Jamaican-born [Michael Richards](#) (1963-2001) was a rising star in the contemporary art world when he perished at age 38 in his Lower Manhattan Cultural Council studio in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. His early death stalled the acknowledgement of the importance of his work but now, in the age of Black Lives Matter, his art is receiving more critical attention. Perhaps this is why the remarkable bronze sculpture depicting open arms, so gracefully generous and yet so strong, is presented at Art Basel Miami Beach 2016.

A long and hard look at this work should reveal why Richards’ black-themed eloquence has become more relevant than ever. Particularly well-regarded is his *Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian*, 1999, cast from his own body, depicting a Tuskegee Airman impaled by eighteen World War II air planes. The sculpture is a shocking, moving emblem of exclusion, sacrifice, and death. It was included in the Studio Museum in Harlem’s 1999-2000 exhibition, “Passages: Contemporary Art in Transition,” which traveled to the Miami Art Museum.

The haunting *Winged*, with its forearms pierced by five bronze feathers, is designed so it appears to float in space, thereby evoking a foreboding sense of spirituality. According to his dealer at the fair, there were only two versions of *Winged* cast: the one on view and another held in the collection of the [Pérez Art Museum Miami](#). Exhibited [Francis M. Naumann Fine Art](#) (New York).

BASIC FACTS: Art Basel Miami Beach takes place from December 1 to 4, 2016 at the Miami Beach

Convention Center, 1901 Convention Center Drive, Miami Beach, FL 33139.
Visit www.artbasel.com/miami-beach for more information.

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