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Fair Share: Takeaways from Art Basel Miami Beach



Courtesy of Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Bruxelles

By Matthew Israel
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An art historian reflects on this year's art event of the season.

Despite the buzz, Art Basel in Miami Beach is *not* the best environment to experience art.

The five-day event (which refers to the Art Basel fair as well as the now 20-plus so-called "satellite" fairs occurring in its vicinity) is neither about making information on artists and their works accessible, nor showcasing expert curation or nuanced installation. Galleries and thousands of artworks are crammed into endless hallways of enlarged white-walled cubicles within massive convention centers, beach tents, hotel ballrooms and warehouses; the facilities are incredibly crowded and noisy, even from the start of the supposedly more exclusive VIP openings—and it only gets worse as the week progresses. All this is to remind us: Art Basel is not a collection of art exhibitions. It's a series of trade shows—albeit prettier versions than most.

But as someone deeply invested in understanding the range of artistic expression and the ideas with which artists are currently

engaging, I find Art Basel to be one of the most necessary experiences of my year. No other art event (at least in the Americas and arguably anywhere else) offers such a volume of work from international galleries to witness in one place.

My approach to the fairs could be characterized as brutally accumulatory: I take as many iPhone pictures and gather as much material (press releases, brochures, catalogues) as possible, all of which I take back to New York to delve into further. This year, I went home with more than 600 photos and a large pile of printed information stuffed into my tote bag(s).

While the volume of works is part of what can make the experience unpleasant, it's also the reason I'm

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able to serendipitously discover so many artists and works I have never heard of or seen. [Joris Van De Moortel](#)'s Rauschenberg-esque constructions in neon and found objects, [Ricardo Alcaide](#)'s painted collages, [Nino Cais](#)'s juxtaposition of wrapped fruits and vegetables and 1940s black-and-white nude photographs and [Michail Pirgelis](#)'s plane parts transformed into sculptures were among the pieces that surprised me and confused my expectations, making me want to stop and learn more.

The deluge of works also makes Art Basel one of the best places to spot trends. The most dominant of the moment—what critic Jerry Saltz calls “zombie abstraction”—was everywhere in Miami. In very short, this is contemporary abstract painting reminiscent of works by Sigmar Polke, Christopher Wool, Albert Oehlen, Wade Guyton or Rudolf Stingel, that foreground flattened allover patterns, drips, smudges or errant spray paint.

I also saw the continued presence of what can be understood as sculpture-based photography, a practice inspired by artists such as Thomas Demand of photographing sculptures or installations constructed for the sole purpose of being photographed. And then there's evidence of the continued influence of 1970s postminimal sculpture—straddling sculpture and performance, these works explore themes of “post-objecthood” by creating ephemeral, scattered, borderline non-coherent forms.

As anyone who's attended the fair before can attest, Miami's edition of Basel is as much about the “secondary” activities as it is about the artworks: the performances, panels and dialogues that take place throughout the city during the five day-long affair. This year there was the Marina Abramović cocktail party at [YoungArts](#) that started with 30 minutes of silence; a panel discussion on Instagram, billed as an art form, featuring the social medium's founder Kevin Systrom and curators Hans Ulrich Obrist and Klaus Biesenbach among others; and a much-hyped performance and party by Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe, which became, purposefully, an Art Basel anti-party—a late-night, alcohol-free, seemingly endless history lecture about an imaginary convention (the San San International) that they said bore resemblances to Art Basel.

And don't forget Miami's ever-increasing number of museums and private collections, which offer the opportunity for “deeper” art experiences with great contemporary art. This year I ended my trip with a visit to the new Herzog and de Meuron-designed [Pérez Art Museum](#), one of the most stunning museum spaces I have experienced in a long time. Miami's museums and collection always offer a welcome change of pace, one that slows me down. At the Perez I was able to have more time to engage with curatorial ideas, learn from considered wall texts and ponder individual artworks in less hectic environs.

Even with everything else going on, the fairs are still the priority. It's a dizzying array, but one that provides a lens into the state of the world (not just the art world) right now—an opportunity to see the concerns, interests and preoccupations of artists from around the globe. As an art historian I find this continually fascinating. And while it's easy to be critical of the art market itself in a setting like Miami Beach, I continue to be appreciative of the chance to be somewhere that so grandly prioritizes art—it's a powerful experience to see all this expression in one place, and to see so many people so passionate about art.

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