

Art Basel Miami Beach Returns, Smaller but Ready to Party

What you'll find at this year's tropical circus: hundreds of galleries, institutions proudly exhibiting homegrown work and an array of NFT-themed gatherings.



Carlos Betancourt at his Miami home with his mixed-media artwork, "Landscapes Re-Imagined" (2020-2021), and pieces from "Milagro!" (2021), the handcrafted tin charms that will hang across Española Way in Miami Beach. Ysa Pérez for The New York Times

MIAMI BEACH — It's back. Canceled last year because of Covid-19, the

annual Art Basel Miami Beach fair returns next week, unfolding throughout the area. Beginning on Tuesday with invitation-only hours, and open to the public Thursday through Saturday, it will feature 253 galleries exhibiting work inside the city's Convention Center, as well as a dizzying number of accompanying satellite art fairs, pop-up shows, and celebrity-studded private dinners.

It's a sprawling cultural circus that has come to be called "Miami Art Week," complete with corporate branding exercises, from a sculptural forest by the stage designer Es Devlin (commissioned by a Chanel fragrance) to a "Yacht the Basel" fete hosted by the snack food Cheetos, with "dynamic original art pieces created from Cheetos' iconic orange dust."

The return of Basel's Miami fair couldn't have come soon enough for the gallerists about to converge on Florida from around the globe. While contemporary art auctions are once again smashing records, overall gallery sales remain sluggish. A midyear Art Basel and UBS report by the economist Dr. Clare McAndrew found that nearly half of the 700 surveyed dealers saw a continued decline in sales during the first six months of 2021. Mega-dealers like Larry Gagosian and David Zwirner, with blue-chip rosters and multiple outposts, were rebounding quickly, the report said. But many smaller dealers, who had relied on Art Basel to develop new clients and introduce emerging talents, had been struggling.



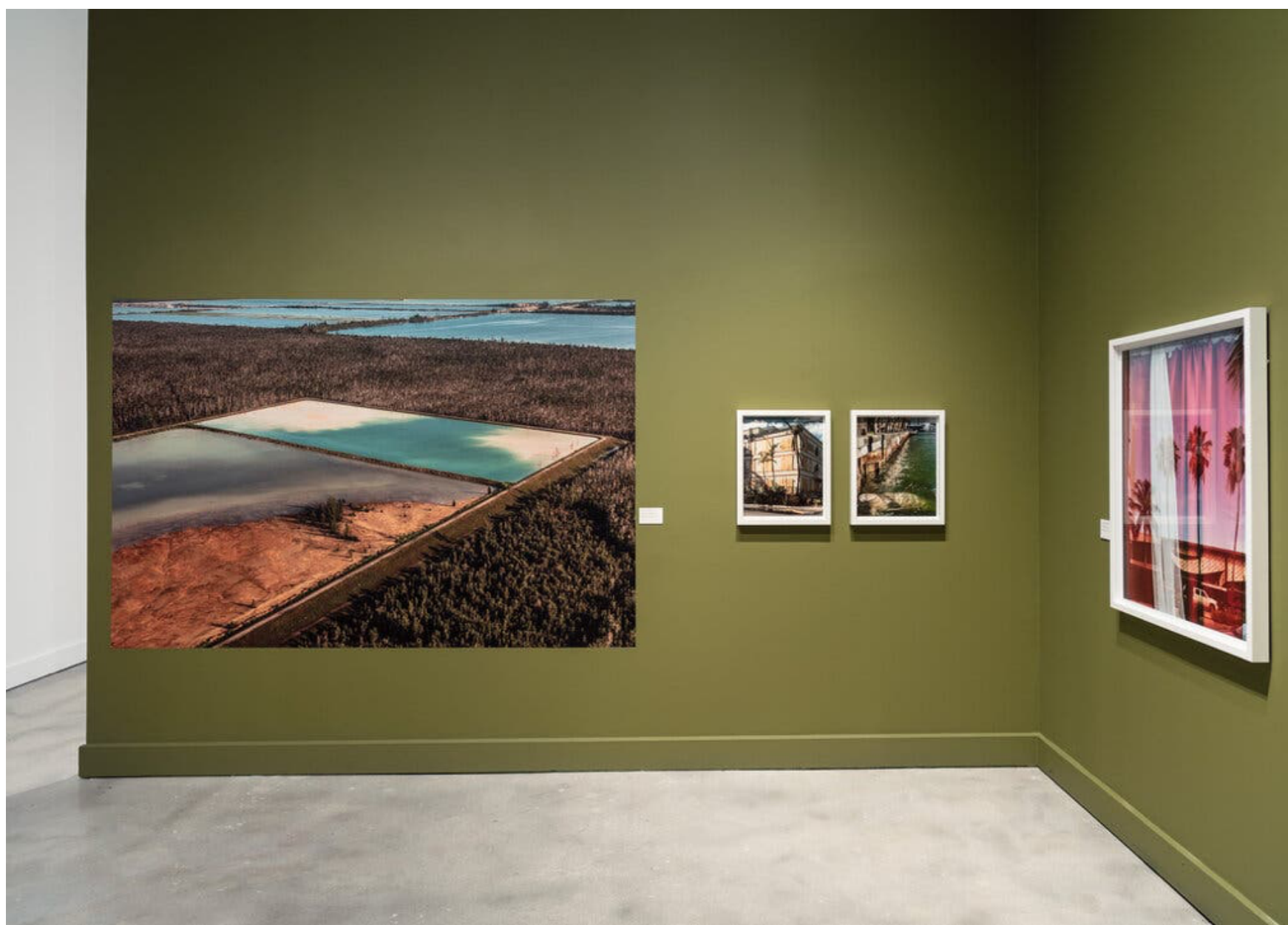
Jared McGriff's "Matadoras" (2019) is part of the Miami painter's solo exhibition at the NSU Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale. Jared McGriff and Spinello Projects Courtesy Spinello Projects

Marc Spiegler, Art Basel's global director, can pinpoint the moment when Miami's revived art frenzy took off: Sept. 20, when the U.S. government said it would lift the Covid travel ban on most visitors from Europe and Asia in November, thus making the Miami fair the first truly international one in the U.S. since the pandemic's start.

Spiegler's phone immediately began burning up with messages from dealers who had previously passed on participating: "By the end of that week more than 30 galleries 'uncancelled,'" he said, noting that despite all the grouching over ["fair fatigue,"](#) there was still no digital substitute for buying and selling art in the flesh. Nearly half the fair's exhibitors will now be arriving from overseas and Latin America. "I've read all the predictions that art fairs were finished, that nobody was going to travel anymore," Spiegler continued. "We have a show

only marginally smaller than the one in 2019.”

This is no doubt a relief for Art Basel’s owners, the Swiss MCH Group, whose stockholder [reports](#) show they have lost more than \$109 million since the pandemic’s start. Yet if the Miami fair’s return is reason for MCH to cheer, the future of its other two art fairs — Art Basel Hong Kong, scheduled for March 2022, and the flagship Art Basel in Switzerland, scheduled for June 2022 — remains uncertain. Even setting aside the growing wave of government [repression](#) and [censorship](#) in Hong Kong, there is a mandatory quarantine of up to three weeks for visitors entering the city. Come March, if that quarantine remains, Spiegler said it’s hard to imagine a full-fledged Basel fair happening. And with Covid infections surging again across Europe, sparking new lockdowns, it’s anyone’s guess what June will bring.



Installation view of the local photographer Anastasia Samoylova’s “FloodZone” at HistoryMiami Museum. Anastasia Samoylova and HistoryMiami Museum

These potential losses in revenue for Art Basel make the smooth execution of the Miami fair all the more crucial. To avoid crowding, entry tickets are now timed and proof of a Covid vaccination or a recent negative test is required, as is the wearing of masks. These protocols may seem familiar — and reassuring — to visitors from New York or Los Angeles, but they're almost nonexistent throughout Miami. Local officials have found themselves overruled on mask mandates by the Florida governor, Ron DeSantis, who has tried to make himself [the face](#) of Republican opposition to Biden administration virus policies. For Spiegler, however, the subject isn't open to debate.

"When you bring together thousands of people from all over the world, wearing masks is the only thing that makes sense," he said. And if a fair attendee, say, a billionaire art collector, refused to comply with the mask mandate? Would Basel's security physically eject them from the Convention Center? "That's what it means to have a mask mandate," Spiegler answered firmly.

Beyond Art Basel, the mood within Miami's year-round art scene is anything but tentative. Superblue, a joint venture of the heavyweight Pace gallery and Laurene Powell Jobs's Emerson Collective, opened this past spring inside a 50,000-square-foot renovated warehouse in the Allapattah neighborhood. Meanwhile, Fotografiska, the privately owned global string of photography museums, has announced that it is moving into the 42,000-square-foot warehouse right across the street, next door to the Rubell Museum, with its David Rockwell-designed building set to open in 2023.



Es Devlin's "Forest of Us," which opened to the public at Superblue in the spring, is an immersive maze that includes interactive projections of visitors. Alfonso Duran for The New York Times

And in the city's pre-eminent galleries, business is strong. At the [Fredric Snitzer Gallery](#), the director, Joshua Veasey, said things are as busy now as at any point during his six-year tenure there. He credits the established collectors who fled cities up north or out west, riding out the coronavirus in their new Miami residences, who began visiting the gallery for the first time.

"After being stuck inside for so long, there was a lot of redecorating," Veasey quipped. "These are the problems of the wealthy." Yet the fresh faces at the gallery didn't emerge out of Miami's newly arrived "tech bros," from the aspiring new media mogul Bryan Goldberg to the PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel, who have relocated here amid a wave of Silicon Valley cheerleading from the city's mayor. New lower-key clients come with the more typical collector backgrounds of finance and real estate development.

What has trickled down from the tech industry is the love of all things NFT. Art Week hosts a bewildering array of NFT-themed gatherings, including the daylong [NFT.BZL](#) conference, featuring a bulging roster of NFT artists, tech figures, and both the city and county mayors. One of the many new NFT marketplaces, [SuperRare](#), has even enlisted the engineers at [SuperWorld](#) to install 20 3-D sculptures throughout Art Basel's Convention Center, viewable there only on their app — a novel way to get in front of influential eyeballs while sidestepping the fair's curatorial committees and the roughly \$60,000 (and up) booth fee.



Carlos Betancourt's animated silhouettes of Florida wildlife lope nightly across the side of the InterContinental Miami hotel. Video by Ysa Pérez For The New York Times

"I was skeptical at first, I wanted to see if NFTs would have more than five minutes of life," conceded the Miami multimedia artist [Carlos Betancourt](#), one of the few established local talents to have embraced the new blockchain-based medium. He said the key to his comfort was finding a platform, [Aorist](#), with a curator, [Ximena Caminos](#), who was already a longtime supporter of his work. That, and Aorist's willingness to produce a real-life version of his seen-only-on-a-screen NFT piece "[What Lies Beneath](#)," which spotlights global warming's rapid melting of the polar ice caps. The result, whose sale will benefit a local underwater sculpture park, is a pair of faux icebergs — one of

which is 20 feet high and 30 feet wide, wrapped in collages of Sven-Olof Lindblad's [photos](#) of actual icebergs, and set afloat in the oceanfront pool of Miami Beach's Faena Hotel.

While room rates at the Faena — starting at \$3,300 a night, \$5,500 for an ocean view — may limit the audience for "What Lies Beneath," it'll still be hard to avoid seeing Betancourt's artwork and its varied styles around Miami next week. "Into The Everglades," his animated silhouettes of Florida wildlife, will [lope nightly](#) across the side of downtown's 35-story-high InterContinental Miami hotel; "Milagro!," a 38-foot-long string of 245 handcrafted charms, commissioned by the city of Miami Beach, will hang across a busy city boulevard; and two of his photos — homoerotic [portraits](#) of both himself and his longtime partner and collaborator, the architect Alberto Latorre — will be featured in a group show, "Skin in the Game," inside a Beach storefront.

His [ubiquity](#), Betancourt said, is proof that Miami's museums and collectors alike have finally embraced the city's own artists, prodded by Art Basel's attention to made-in-Miami work. "People had an inferiority complex here for many years," he continued, recalling his arrival from Puerto Rico as a teenager in 1980, discovering an art scene that too often looked elsewhere for direction. The shift is evident next week as local institutions proudly exhibit work steeped in Miami's social fabric.





A photograph by Gary Monroe taken in 1980 of the "Refuseniks," the Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union newly resettled in South Beach hotels until they could find more permanent residences. Gary Monroe

For starters, Anastasia Samoylova's "FloodZone" photos at the [HistoryMiami](#) museum capture an often surreal visual interplay of flora, fauna, and crumbling concrete; Gary Monroe's "Refuseniks" photographs at Florida International University's [Miami Beach Urban Studios](#) offer a poignant study of early '80s

Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union rebuilding new lives in a then-unraveling South Beach; and Jared McGriff's otherworldly paintings at the [NSU Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale](#) depict visions of Black life that are simultaneously troubled and stirringly gorgeous.

This seriously minded artwork is being presented within the context of a tropical weeklong party. If that seems contradictory, Betancourt believes that embracing that contradiction is precisely what has made Miami finally come into its own as an art city: "We enjoy the party and that manifests itself in our work," he said. "That's what Miami brings to the equation — we do it all unapologetically."

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