

Miami Review of private art collections

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M i a m i

Review of PRIVATE ART COLLECTIONS

CRISSA-JEAN CHAPPELL

A cardboard cutout of a tuxedo-clad Bill Clinton beckons into a wholesale clothing warehouse. The figure's mitteny hands point eastward, as if directing traffic or part of an impromptu hula dance. Around the corner, a beauty discount store advertises fine weaving, kanekalon braids, and human hair. Three T-shirts for ten bucks, says a faded poster. Along a low-slung telephone wire, soggy tennis shoes in various stages of disintegration dangle like bones on a plate after a meal.

"Welcome to the fashion district," declares a Pez-purple sign, though the paint has blistered so one can hardly read it. Ten years ago, who could have guessed that the war zone, riddled with low-income housing and a parched landscape of warehouse space, would become home to some of the world's most cutting-edge design

showrooms and sprawling art complexes. With the popularity of the beach expanding among fashion-savvy South Americans and vacationing Europeans, downtown Miami is cultivating a competitive energy of modern style and youth culture.

"It's no longer happening in Soho," says Bernice Steinbaum. After 22 years of operating a pioneer art gallery in New York, she has relocated to downtown Miami and set up a two-story, 10,000 square foot building that includes three MacArthur genius winners (Pepon Osorio, Amalia Mesa-Bains and Deborah Willis). Fifty percent of her artists are women and forty percent are of different ethnic backgrounds (African, Asian, Latino, and Asian American). Locust Projects, located between the Design District and the so-called Media-Production-Entertainment District, transformed a crackhouse into an alternative space in which to produce and show contemporary installation, media projects, and video and performance art. They encourage local and national talent to create site-specific works instead of carting truckloads of canvas a day before the opening. Their mission is to publicize

"powerful and often underrepresented projects" dismissed by traditional galleries and museums.

Nestled above a wheel of sleek design stores including Knoll and Waterworks, Kevin Bruk, a hip young art dealer, launched a new gallery in the belief that the city is "ready to support an intellectually stimulating contemporary art scene." He chose downtown because of the cutting-edge furniture companies and architects that surround his space. People who buy high-design work will usually share an interest in modern art. "I think there's a very young, culture-hungry market in Miami. I mean, people are pretty fashion-forward. The city is growing at a pretty fast pace," he says. "And essentially, with the exception of the two museums (Miami Art Museum and Museum of Contemporary Art), there are few outlets for contemporary art."

Last Friday, he celebrated an exhibition of six new Peter Halley paintings made specifically for his gallery. Halley, co-founder of *Index magazine*, highly influential painter, critic, and teacher, first gained recognition in the early 1980s for his lonely, geometrical paintings of square cells and Day-Glo conduits. His one-person exhibitions have appeared in many museums, including the MOMA, New York (1998). Also on display were Daniella Rossel's cheeky photographs of *nouveau riche* Mexican society, containing, in Bruk's words, "a little sex appeal and slutty quality."

Downstairs, the air is heavy as gauze. Crowbar's DJ Shannon blasts battle rhymes as trendy types in sulky black clothing fire up cigarettes. In the centre of the vast space, surrounding an enormous, mirror-

The Margulies Photography Gallery, Miami. Photo: Harlan Erskine.



encrusted sculpture of a high-heeled shoe, a chain of tables dole out free drinks doused with vodka. Across the street at Pranich and Associates, a thin-muscled man grinds beside a GoGo-girl and a swivel-hipped crossdresser in the long, misted windows. A phalanx of off-duty police guard the doors, huddled like conspirators.

Bruk is planning an array of parties to compliment his openings with potential guest musicians like DJ Spooky and punk icon Iggy Pop. This spring, he'll host an exhibit called *Plugged In*, which focuses on artists who incorporate computers, electricity, and a variety of media. Miami's own Robert Chambers, a visiting professor of sculpture at UM and NYU, will feature his breathable, glowing, organic-looking lungs in the show. Roxy Paine, the quirky New York-based sculptor, hooks up a computer to a machine on a conveyer belt which oozes resin into automatic sculptures called *Scumaks* — a piece that received more reviews than any other exhibition last year.

Navigating a few blocks north, another bash at Miami Design Lab combines art chic and club mentality to produce *Disco*, works by artists who realize "the power of the disco ball both aesthetically and culturally and its current resurgence in our popular landscape." Greasy people in rustling gowns are getting down on Carla Arocha's sculpture of carpeted squares. From the ceiling, a galaxy of mirror balls courtesy of John Armleder spill shivery chips of light along the white, plastic walls.

Biscayne Boulevard, better known for its moral misgivings, has become a block party for those sashaying to the swollen music. Glass flutes of champagne sparkle under the parking meters. Once in a while, a tinkling noise indicates that someone has tripped over them. Meanwhile, Peter Beard is in Tunney's waterlogged, salty-smelling gallery, smearing blood-coloured finger paintings into personally autographed photography books.

The next day, downtown opens another jewel in the burgeoning line of private galleries, The Margulies photography collection, housed in a 15,000 square ft. former dress factory. For schools and universities, this granite canyon provides an extensive education in contemporary and vintage photography. Where else could three, large-format, stark-eyed Thomas Struth portraits (including one rare black-and-white) stand side-by-side on a single wall? In the adjacent room, Sally Mann's precocious daughters, printed in 19th century techniques and buttery tones, seem to already know that they are sexual creatures. Other artists include Bill Owens, Kwong Chi, Hannah Starkey, Roland Fischer and many more. The Margulies plan to provide additional space



in their sprawling compound for student exhibits. Walking through the collection, interspersed with eclectic modern sculptures (upcoming works include a rainmaking room), one feels a sense of intelligence in the exhibit, as through each work compliments the next. The soft-spoken curators were too eager to show everyone around — even when a twangy-voiced woman in a puffy dress declared, "We have that in our museum!" and another pair of snoopy ladies toppled and punctured a bubble-wrapped canvas, muttering, "At least no one was hurt."

Art Miami, now in its 11th year, isn't exactly the world's most celebrated festival, nor is it crammed with international visitors. The city's museum scene has been inconsistent at best. Though several exhibition spaces have made forays into collecting nationally acclaimed work, limited support and political infighting have made it a difficult proposition. At last, Miami has received some authenticity, thanks to private collectors like the Rubell family. Don (whose brother, Steve, brought fame to Studio 54) and his wife, Mera, own several thousand pieces in their collection. Only ten percent are on display, which changes twice a year and supplements an extensive loan program with museums across continents.

The Rubells were among the first to buy Keith Haring's stick-figure graffiti iconography. Cindy Sherman was a mere secretary at a New York art centre when the

Rubells bought one of her infamous film stills for 50 dollars. The Rubells tend to buy an artist's entire exhibition instead of individual pieces. This recent trend amongst modern art super-collectors like Sensation's Charles Saatchi (the ex Thatcher ad man) allows the context of a complete work to remain intact.

The collection, located in a former DEA confiscation building often featured in *Miami Vice*, relates to the type of environment where artists might create their pieces. In this manner, the context of the work remains pure instead of suffocating in a formal museum setting that might catalogue them like long-dead zoo creatures. The Rubells have tried to retain the original character of the building. Standard fluorescent lighting lends a sour hue to the exposed ceilings and sand-gritty floors, very subtle touches not found in a traditional museum space, although the environment doesn't look like a stuffy, climate-controlled museum. Their collection "speaks of us now, as opposed to our parents' and grandparents' generation," says South African director Mark Coetzee. "It's the young crowd — though I hate that word, it's so condescending — that appreciates it the most. It's a place where they can find their voice, their identity, their reality." The Rubell family have a very friendly relationship with galleries and artists all over the world. They travel all the time and come into contact with art before critics and historians

The Bakerhouse Art Complex, a former bakery, Miami. Photo: Harlan Erskine.

know what they're doing. This is one of the processes that allow them to acquire the most up-to-date work.

In upcoming months, the Rubells are hosting a series of lectures at their Beach House called *Pillow Talk*. The first guest speaker was superstar Jeff Koons, the self-



Pictures of the Bakerhouse Art Complex, a former bakery, Miami. Photo: Harlan Erskine.

The Margulies Photography Gallery, Miami. Photo: Harlan Erskine.

proclaimed "most written-about artist in the world," who, like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, arranges everyday objects into artforms. He spoke of postmodernism and of the trials of exposing his private self with a public viewing audience. The Rubells have also been very instrumental in bringing the Basel Art Fair to the city. As one of the oldest and most respected international art fairs, it will help raise Miami's growing reputation in the art world and educate the public in a series of city-wide exhibitions at various institutions starting next December. Never before has such an event combined the private collections in South Florida for the viewing public.

"When you're a young artist starting out," says Mark, "you're desperate for people to buy your work. What becomes interesting is that, as your career moves, that turns upside-down. You have too many collectors fighting for a small art production. The fact that the Rubells are managing to get the most important pieces from artists comes from building their relationship with these people. In fact, many artists give them first choice. The artists seek the

Rubells because their collection is known throughout the world. And then, the Rubells have made connections because, unlike other collections that are about finance or prestige, this is about the love of the art. The mayor of New York is saying, "Close down the show." (Sensation exhibit in Brooklyn) and they're buying the pieces."

He insists that the Rubells' ability to discern interesting or provocative works allows them to buy pieces before the artist's popularity soars and the price escalates. Others complain that the Rubells have cornered the market by accumulating entire instalments or "buying out" the artist like a monopoly. On the first floor, major acquisitions by New York-based painters depict different movements in the synapse-frying 1980s, like Gilbert and George thumbing their noses at male-oriented religious iconography or Julian Schnabel's kitschy black velvet skull smudged in shadow. Upstairs, Damien Hirst's gravity-defying skeletons greet the spectator at the top of the stairs. As a forerunner of the so-called young British artist movement, (yBa), characterized by their entrepreneurial spirit and media savvy, he is best known for his cross-sections of pickled beasts. The Rubells are currently displaying his cabinet of loose-jointed human skeletons and menacing steel surgical instruments, along with a lesser-known, polka-dotted painting. Adjacent stands Chris Ofili's glossy, glittery bead-like collages, balls of elephant dung adorning the necklaces of elegant nobility, just as they decorated the three-dimensional breast of his controversial Madonna. Not far from the Rubells' classy, cube-shaped warehouse, a historic bakery houses 70 studios called The Bakehouse Art Complex. They host a variety of team-taught art classes for troubled youth and also enclose the Diaspora Vibe Gallery, where immigrant artists have a chance to show their works, particularly non-Cuban artists who don't feel welcome by local galleries. The gallery conducts an annual summer mini-residency from May to October, where each artist works in the studio space and eventually exhibits on an evening dubbed "Final Fridays." The night tries to capture the essence of the featured artist, including the cuisine and music of their home country. Fred Snitzer recently juried an exhibition at the Bakehouse. His gallery, on the edge of Coral Gable's warehouse district, deals in the work of young contemporary artists like Jose Bedia, Luis Cruz Azaceta and Ed Paschke, who exhibit exclusively with Snitzer in South Florida.

"I'm excited about the quality of the artists working in the Miami area," says Richard Shack, the board chairman of the ArtCenter/South Florida in Miami Beach and the emeritus board chairman of MOCA. His

wife, Ruth, is president of the Dade Community Foundation. When they married, they made an agreement to give each other gifts of art as long as the price remained under \$100. In his oceanside aerie, among the trophy penthouses on Brickell, he views his living space as a personal gallery. "The pieces don't own us," he says, disregarding a museum's velvet rope approach. When he wants to keep his grandkids busy, he tells them to count the chairs in Pedro Friedeberg's mirrored niche, reflecting infinity. In the morning, he wakes to the molten tones of Rauschenberg's Slingshot 4. He gets excited talking about the artists,



most of whom he met long before they became ultra-famous. From his balcony, the insect dirge of construction drones in preparation for a new Four Seasons hotel. He stands back and squints at a long-lens perspective of downtown — a happy vacation postcard. It's like looking backward in time and seeing through it like water. ■

Il y a dix ans à peine, peu de gens auraient pu imaginer que le centre-ville de Miami — avec ses habitations à loyers modiques, ses entrepôts vides et ses maisons de crack — deviendrait le cœur de l'avant-garde artistique contemporaine. Artistes, galeristes, collectionneurs, jeunes et ethnies diverses s'y sont installés, transformant les lieux en nouveaux espaces alternatifs d'expérimentation, d'exposition, voire parfois en imposants complexes artistiques. Ici se côtoient des œuvres créées *in situ*, des sculptures aux formes organiques qui « respirent » et brillent, des performances incorporant différents médiums, et des sculptures automatiques en résine appelées « scumaks ». Une ancienne manufacture de couture de 15 000 pi² abrite la collection de photos Margulies, tandis que la collection de la célèbre famille Rubell est située dans un vieil entrepôt qu'on a pu voir dans la série *Miami Vice*. Les Rubell, à l'instar de plusieurs collectionneurs en art contemporain, n'achètent plus uniquement des œuvres mais des expositions entières, de sorte que certains affirment que ce n'est plus à Soho mais à Miami que les choses se passent désormais !