

100+ DEGREES IN THE SHADE

A Survey of South Florida Art

BEYOND PINK FLAMINGOS AND ART FAIRS: A BRIEF HISTORY

By Erica Ando

History in South Florida, the saying goes, starts when you get off the plane. So it might be surprising to find that art has been here a long time, and not just since Art Basel Miami Beach landed.

Though South Florida notoriously loves the new and shiny, its artists know there's something behind the quick-and-easy façade of sultry vacations. The year-round, day-to-day grittiness of living and making art in South Florida has been around for decades, creating an art story of breakthroughs, evolutions, and constant surprises.

Artists have been visiting the region and marveling at its unique land since the 18th century. The current South Florida art scene was built, though, on booming post-World War II real estate development, making it possible to live here full-time, and not just in hotels. In the 1950s, landscape artists like Franz Joseph Bolinger and Beanie Backus were considered the area's preeminent painters. Today, Backus is best remembered as teacher to the Florida Highwaymen, a group of 26 African-American landscape artists who have been called the "last great American art movement of the 20th century." Self-taught and self-mentoring, they created a body of work of over 200,000 paintings despite facing many racial and cultural barriers. Florida landscape painting, once derided as kitsch, added to the area's tropical image (and real estate values)

but also contrasted with dominant, New York School abstract painting of the time.

With so few places to experience visual art, there's no wonder tourists returned home to claim South Florida a cultural wasteland. Two early venues, however, were the Miami Beach Library and Art Center (today, the older portion of the Bass Museum of Art), established in 1935, and the Washington Art Galleries (at today's Wolfsonian/FIU), established in 1940, which both exhibited local art from Miami's artist organizations. In West Palm Beach, the Norton Museum of Art opened in 1940 as one of the area's first private collector-owned museums.

Starting in the 1950s, the University of Miami enjoyed a reputation as the center of "real" culture—as opposed to Miami Beach tourist entertainment. In 1950, art professor Virgil Barker established the University's gallery, later to become the Lowe Art Museum. The Lowe attracted national attention for its programs that included exhibitions of French Impressionism and Renaissance painting, borrowed from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Eugene Massin was the influential head of the art department, educating generations of future South Florida artists.

Around that time, Coconut Grove, a South Florida enclave akin to NYC's Greenwich Village, attracted an art community of famed folk singers and well-regarded visual artists like Tony Scornavacca, Jack Amoroso, Gigi Aramescu, Klara Farkas, and Leonard King. Grove House (1960-81), the cooperative artists' marketplace, gave artists a place to show and sell their work.

According to artist Robert Thiele, who moved to South Florida in 1966, artists in the early years simply aimed to do their work. They had few aspirations to exhibit in local institutions, which "generally had a hands-off policy in terms of the home-grown product." Awakening the art scene was *33 Miami Artists* (1971), an

exhibition juried by Robert Doty, then-curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Doty speculated Miami's unique art developed from isolation, a New York-style compliment-slash-critique that the art, though high quality, was not yet right for the big time. Thiele (selected for the Whitney Biennial several years later) and Robert Huff (1945-2014) were both included in *33 Miami Artists* and are featured in *100+ Degrees in the Shade*, palpably linking us to that earlier time.

That earlier exhibition was held at the Miami Art Center, which had splintered off from the Lowe to provide classes in studio art and art history. Visiting artists like Robert Motherwell and Josef Albers conducted workshops and exhibited their work there. The Art Center's students — artists-in-training — were also given exhibition opportunities.

Commercial galleries existed but preferred to show New York artists. Support came, instead, from alternative venues. An unlikely source was Miami-Dade County's Public Library System, where in the early-70s Margarita Cano established a circulating collection of local printmakers' reproductions. Barbara Young ran the Libraries' Artmobile (1976-93), art-exhibitions-on-wheels. From the beginning, their forward-thinking collection and exhibitions emphasized local Latino and Latin American, African-American, and women artists. Helen Kohen, former Miami Herald art critic, along with Cano and Young, founded the Vasari Project Archive (2000-present) in the Libraries to collect ephemera and other materials documenting the visual arts in Miami-Dade County since 1945.

Other alternative venues were the area's colleges and universities. In 1970, Miami-Dade College Gallery at South Campus was established by Robert Sindelir, and over the years, the College's various campuses created a network of galleries. In the early 70s, an exhibition there of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work predated

the cultural transformation their *Surrounded Islands* (1983) would have on South Florida. In addition, Florida International University's gallery (today the Frost Art Museum) was established by painting professor James Couper in 1977. Florida Atlantic University's Galleries were established in 1983 by art history professor David Courtney. The Art Gallery at Palm Beach State College was established in 1995. From their beginnings, these college and university galleries gave (and continue to give) South Florida artists opportunities to develop their work in non-commercial settings.

The colleges, like the Miami Art Center, also educated future artists as well as future audiences. For example, Thiele and his colleagues at Miami-Dade College—Huff, Duane Hanson, and Salvatore La Rosa—taught artists represented in *100+ Degrees*, including William Cordova, Luis Gispert, Jane Hart (aka TJ Ahearn, her artist alias, an anagram of her name), and many others.

One museum offered opportunities to South Florida artists (and artists beyond) when others venues not: the ambitiously—and awkwardly—named Miami Museum of Modern Art (1959-73). Founder Bernard Davis was a friend and early supporter of Purvis Young (1943-2010), included in *100+ Degrees*, Eleanora Chambers (mother of artist Robert Chambers), Dorothy Gillespie, Jack Hopkins, Duane Hanson, and hundreds of others. He also educated a growing art audience and patron base, including collectors Ruth and Richard Shack, who credited Davis for their lifelong advocacy and involvement in art.

The early 80s was a time of soul-searching in South Florida, when the overwhelming, sudden influx of exiles and immigrants from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and other politically troubled places, along with city-shattering race riots, sharply challenged the region's tropical tourist reputation. In 1983, the Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture (1974-99) presented *The Miami Generation/La Generacion de Miami*, curated by Giulio V. Blanc and organized

by Margarita Cano. The exhibition featured 9 first-generation exile artists born in Cuba and educated in the United States. Traveling to Paris, Santiago, and Mexico City, the exhibition introduced, to the world, an art community whose complicated bicultural identity hinted at Miami's major, upcoming role in 1990s multicultural art discourse.

The Center of Contemporary Art (1981-96)—co-founded by Lou Anne Colodny, represented as an artist in 100+ Degrees—cultivated South Florida art when few other area institutions did. CoCA was the first local alternative space, consistently focusing on area artists and giving them free reign to experiment.

With the decision to become a collecting museum, CoCA became Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami in 1996. Then-curator Bonnie Clearwater mounted her first exhibition at MoCA that year, *Defining the Nineties*, audaciously placing Miami on the art map alongside New York and Los Angeles. The exhibition introduced a previously easygoing South Florida art audience to notions of consensus-making and art collectors' "overriding influence on the opinions formed on new art." Clearwater intimated artists were also players in the consensus-making game, a reflection of increasing art world careerism.

Today, many of the institutions mentioned above are defunct, altered, or underfunded, evidencing the shifting sands that famously support South Florida institutions. A reaction to this instability—along with a DIY spirit—are 2 noteworthy strains: the "Miami Model" collector-owned museums and artist-run alternative spaces. In 1993, the Rubell Family Collection opened its collection to the public in a former DEA warehouse, part of a shift toward collectors' increased visibility. The list of high-profile collectors who have opened their collections to the public or are highly active in the art community seems endless: Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz, Martin Z. Margulies, Ella Fontanals-Cisneros,

Francie Bishop Good and David Horvitz, Debra and Dennis Scholl, Elayne and Marvin Mordes, Craig Robins, Dan and Kathryn Mikesell, Irma and Norman Braman, Liza and Arturo F. Mosquera, Paul and Estelle Berg, and others. Some of these art patrons have also established and supported alternative spaces, residencies, and affordable studio spaces such as Girls' Club, Whitespace, Cannonball, Farside Gallery, and Fountainhead Residency.

On the other end of the do-it-yourself spectrum, Art Center/South Florida (1984-present) and Bakehouse Art Complex (1986-present) were established by artists to secure much-needed exhibition spaces and affordable studios. Other artist-founded spaces have included Artifacts Art Salon, Wet Paint House, The Box, Locust Projects, The House, BFI, Bridge Red, Dimensions Variable, Swampspace, Obsolete Media Miami (O.M.M.), Laundromat Art Space, The Projects of FATVillage, GUCCIVUITTON, Twenty/Twenty, Turn-Based Press and many others, encouraging artists to develop their work without art market pressures. Some of these projects have been supported by real estate developers, most notably Craig Robins, who temporarily hand over unused commercial properties. In perpetually booming South Florida, real estate development ties in closely with art. For both collector-owned museums and artist-run galleries, the pervasive, all-powerful art market remains in focus: one celebrates it, the other resists it.

It was the collectors, however, not the artists, who attracted Art Basel Miami Beach (ABMB) organizers to create a Miami fair that's become the art world's most extravagant, spectacle-driven annual event. Miami Basel's imminent arrival in 2001 touched off a veritable exhibition frenzy. Artists went all out to show the world their power, staging guerilla art and impromptu, out-of-the-white-box shows. Departing Perspectives, organized by gallerist Fredric Snitzer and mounted during the international Art Miami fair in 2000 (ABMB's predecessor), established South Florida as an arena

for exuberant presentations in unconventional settings. Popping up in a demolition-destined bank building, the exhibition featured over 40 area artists—well-known ones alongside students from Miami’s New World School of the Arts. Exhibition series in this vein include *Home Show*, curated by Eugenia Vargas (1999-2003), *Showtel* (2001-09) and *10 x 10* (2007-10) in West Palm Beach, curated by Kara Walker Tomé.

With ABMB in sight, MoCA exhibited 22 artists in *Making Art in Miami: Travels in Hyperreality* (2000). Bonnie Clearwater and Gean Moreno (*100+ Degrees* artist and catalog publisher, and a long-time critic and curator) both aimed in their catalog essays, to pinpoint a particular Miami aesthetic coinciding with then-trendy postmodern art criticism. For them, Miami’s (and Florida’s) intrinsic postmodernism linked the artists to the art world beyond. The Miami Art Museum (now the Pérez Art Museum Miami), also sensing its reputation hinged on recognizing and integrating with the local art scene, launched the exhibition series “New Work Miami” in 2001, strengthening its mission to serve the community by promoting area artists.

Fluidity, so prominent a metaphor in ocean-fronted South Florida, characterizes many artists’ practices. Artists regularly team up for collaborations and many do double and triple duty as curators, art space founders, and writers. For example (each represented in *100+ Degrees*): Gean Moreno, critic, curator, arts administrator and founder of [NAME] Publications (publishing this book); Adler Guerrier, Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova, and Frances Trombly, founders of Dimensions Variable; *100+ Degrees* curator Jane Hart, artist, arts writer and gallery owner; and Robert Chambers, who has organized a variety of curatorial platforms both in South Florida and other locations.

Robert Chambers lists on his vast resumé curation of *globe>miami<island* at the Bass Museum of Art in 2001, a momentous, 60-plus South Florida artist survey exhibition. Artists had anticipated the international art world’s arrival and had

planned for ABMB's inaugural edition, only to find it cancelled following 9/11. For Chambers, forging ahead with the exhibition took on added urgency—precisely because the out-of-towners wouldn't be coming. *Miami New Times* art critic Alfredo Triff called it “the best show I've seen in years in Miami” because its ebullience, which had been packaged for the outside world, was celebrated as an end in itself.

Since ABMB's official arrival in 2002, South Florida art institutions have noticeably shown more commitment to area artists, evident from a comparison with earlier times. It's also evident that institutions are making efforts to bring international attention and audiences to the area. PAMM's gleaming, Herzog & deMeuron designed building and its new director Franklin Sirmans, the Bass Museum of Art's multimillion-dollar city grant to expand its facilities, the Norton Museum of Art's expansion designed by Lord Norman Foster, ICA Miami's plans to build a permanent home in the Design District, MoCA's new, currently-being-defined era, NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale's recent shift in leadership that boasts Bonnie Clearwater as director—considered together, these museums' future plans (many of them government-funded) will showcase South Florida and its art. This brief history doesn't suggest progress has been linear, ideal, or easy. Despite all ABMB promised, sudden art world success eluded many artists. Instead, a new awareness settled in. For example, in *Miami in Transition* (2006), held at the Miami Art Museum, 21 area artists inwardly inspected Miami's art as it related to the region's rapid and sometimes alarming transformations.

Since ABMB's inception, some prominent artists have left the area to stake out greater prospects. Additionally, rampant real estate development continually threatens to evict artists from affordable studio and exhibition spaces. Given the art market's and collectors' conspicuity, it's surprising that artists here—like artists everywhere—struggle to sell their art and sustain their practices.

Exhibition opportunities abound, however, with artists-curators and artist-run spaces making sure that South Florida continues to develop its art. 100+ Degrees in the Shade demonstrates the breadth, longevity, and variety that artists here have known for years. Shown throughout multiple venues, mainly in artist-run alternative spaces, this multi-generational, multi-career level, stylistically varied exhibition proves that South Florida's artistic diversity can be brought together under one banner.

For decades, artists in South Florida have been making art, showing it, and appreciating it, whether or not the world was watching.

Erica Ando is an art writer and historian. She recently earned her PhD from Florida Atlantic University. Her dissertation research traced the founding of the Pérez Art Museum Miami—in its first iteration as the Center for the Fine Arts—from the post-World War II years to the early 1980s. She has a BFA from Parsons School of Design and an MFA from Tyler School of Art.

Her writing has appeared in *Art Papers*, *Artpress* (Paris), *Sculpture*, *Aesthetica* (UK), *Naked Punch* (UK), *Miami Rail*, and Broward County's *Cultural Quarterly*. She is the founder of *Category 16*, a website that covers art in South Florida.

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SOUTH FLORIDA ART: A BRIEF SLANTED HISTORY SINCE THE 80S

by Sandra Schulman

Follow the artists.

That is the mantra to find any new up and coming hood, scene, movement, money and ultimately, art history. After the crash and burn of NYC's East Village gallery scene, where I had a gallery that showed some heavy hitters 20 years too soon, I, like many of

my restless fellow gentrified outta town art heathens, fled the brutal winters of Avenues A through D and Streets 1st through 14th, and landed in surreal, sunshiny South Beach. A place we had only seen sitting huddled in front of TVs in our tenements on the neon, sockless show Miami Vice, it looked like paradise – Art Deco buildings on the ocean with rents as low as a few hundred dollars. An empty beach with warm, wavy water. Cheap Cuban joints with hearty rice and bean meals that replaced the pirogues and bagels of Alphabet City. Storefronts begging for a new start. A closed road mall that was retro and ripe, so deserted you could roll a bowling ball down it and not hit a soul.

It was Heaven.

It was Hell.

Crime and Marielitos. No air-conditioning. Crack and dope and shadows in the alleys. Scarface in the streets.

But... follow the artists. This is where they went. Filling up Espanola Way, taking over space on Washington Avenue, squatting in abandoned Mediterranean mansions on Biscayne Bay. It was a wild west for art and artists, show downs and shoot 'em ups were nightly Kimosabee.

Howard Davis' Artifacts Art Group had already staked their turf, mounting multimedia, fly by night installations at the club Fire & Ice, the Wet Paint House, Warsaw and Club Nu. They made parade floats out of sawed off trucks, lit houses on fire, decorated the discos and threw endless parties in parking garages. Their commotion landed them in Andy Warhol's Interview Magazine by the mid-80s with a multi-page spread that touted this burgeoning art paradise and its heat crazed, paint brush wielding inhabitants. Lincoln Road opened their own Art Center, giving artists both communal exhibition space and individual studios. Some branched out into their own larger spaces like Carlos Betancourt's Imperfect Utopia that found the stupidly handsome, budding painter painting in the front, living in the back, and entertaining the rich, powerful and merely curious that braved the early semi-mean street days of Miami Beach. Betancourt, represented in this survey and book, has

become a world class artist whose colorful, surreal, unclassifiable mashup of slick photography, installations and self portraiture is collected and exhibited worldwide.

Kevin Arrow, a New Times Mastermind Award winner, started in the Espanola Way Art Center painting mandalas, working with Artifacts and curating space for developers like artist supporter Craig Robins. He zeroed in on slides and projectors and other outdated retro media, collecting them with an insane hoarder's zeal and now finds himself the archivist at the new Science Museum creating shows as well as exhibiting his projected work and helming OMM – Obsolete Media Miami, an analog gearhead paradise.

Far from the shimmering sands and candy colored buildings, no wilderness was wilder than Overtown, where ex-con self taught street artist Purvis Young was grabbing mattresses, doors and window frames off the curb and turning them into priceless folk art he toted around in shopping carts. His strange new worlds were teaming with mysterious angels, blackened horses and gritty urban cityscapes from which there was no escape. Young made ghetto heads turn when mega collectors Don and Mera Rubell – kin to the late Studio 54 disco kingpin – bought the entire 3,000 piece contents of his studio in one fell swoop. Money and media attention made for a messy end, but Young's work lives on in his own museum in Fort Lauderdale, run by Larry Clemons.

The Bakehouse Art Complex bravely took over an abandoned bakery in 1986, providing studio space for those off the beach, in Miami's Wholesale Garment District. Monthly open studio nights and group shows gave the arts community another outpost in the tropic wilderness.

Over in gritty Wynwood, pioneering gallerist Brook Dorsch set up shop and then Locust Projects, a venue dedicated to site-specific installation art, was established by artists Westen Charles, Cooper, and Elizabeth Withstanley. Gean Moreno was their first program director and set the tone for an experimental aesthetic that endures. Dennis Scholl was Locust's champion, helping to establish them as

a non-profit while founder of their board of directors.

Subsequently, over several years, many galleries flocked to this bleak neighborhood, transforming it into a colorful, cacophonous destination. Tony Goldman, a New Yorker who helped transform Soho, and then re-discovered South Beach's real estate and historic value back in the 80s, saw some blank warehouse walls and had a vision of murals plastered block to block. To make that happen he tapped art circus ringmaster Jeffrey Deitch to bring in the boys and girls who think and draw big. Soon they spray painted the hell outta the hood, and threw down bar/restaurants, studio space and hipster retail stores, all up against the glorious new walls. It's now a victim of its own success, much like South Beach, with artists being driven out once again.

Collectors like the Rubells, along with Debra and Dennis Scholl, Rosa and Carlos De La Cruz, Craig Robins, and Ella Cisneros began opening their own spaces in humongous buildings – some of them larger than MOCA and the Bass Museum.

These globe trotting, art buying collectors all set the wheels in motion for Art Basel to come to Miami, bringing a whole new level of sophistication, money, media attention, and respect to Miami's dark, "fun in the sun," land of excess reputation. Dozens of art fairs spun out from Art Basel Miami Beach, like twisters in a hurricane, sweeping up careers and scenes in its wake.

Downtown's Miami Art Museum, was transformed, amid some controversy, into the Perez Art Museum Miami. It's architecturally innovative structure was erected on the bank of Biscayne Bay 2 years ago; defying hurricanes, floods and naysayers, bringing in Chinese rabble rouser Ai Wei Wei as its opening act.

So what now, kids?

Follow the artists.

Don't tell anyone but they're moving to Little River, another mean street warehouse train tracked community ready for a new chance. The pioneers this time include developer Avra Jain, together with her New York based associates, who scooped up the majority of MiMo motels along Biscayne Boulevard, including the crown

jewel Vagabond Hotel with its dolphin fountain, mermaid mural in the pool and retro, fab neon signage. Saving them all from their trampy past as a red light drug district, Jain is invested in reshaping this primarily Haitian community, providing an ever expanding playground of bars, restaurants, galleries and other trendy establishments, in her words "curating the neighborhood." One can even eat fried grasshoppers in her restaurant.

The future's so bright we better wear shades. And follow the ones already packing to leave Little River.

Sandra Schulman is an arts writer and film producer. She co-founded two galleries in NYC in the 1980s - Spiritual America and 303 Gallery, her book on Spiritual America was released in the of Spring 2015. She has curated art exhibitions for galleries and museums in New York City, Los Angeles, Joshua Tree and Southampton. Schulman is currently an Arts columnist for WPB Magazine, writes for *HamptonsArtHub.com* and is working as a consultant on various art and film projects in development.

Her work has appeared in *Billboard*, *Variety*, *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Ocean Drive*, *The New York Daily News*, *Country Music Magazine*, and *News From Indian Country*. She was an entertainment columnist for the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* for 8 years.

Part Cherokee, she has become a spokesperson for Native American causes on TV and radio. Raised in New York, she has worked in NYC, Miami Beach, Los Angeles, Joshua Tree, and Nashville, Tennessee.