

SWISS HIT

The city of vice is now the city of culture, thanks to ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH. In 10 years, the slick art fair has transformed Miami and spawned a lasting creative legacy.

Words: Esther Park Photography: Jeffery Salter



The Wynwood Walls, boasting world-class street art and launched during Art Basel in 2009, are the most visible example of Miami's cultural transformation.

In a dilapidated area of Miami, a neon sign on the outside of a building blinks the word “Diet.” Its hot-pink, cursive lettering conjures up an old city diner in the middle of an industrial wasteland. But no food is served in these parts—only art. Welcome to Wynwood: the new pulse of the Miami Art Scene.

“When I opened my gallery four years ago, I used to put my keys between my fingers—just in case—and run to my car with the fear of getting mugged,” says Gallery Diet’s owner, the brightly coiffed Nina Johnson. “Now, it’s common to see pedestrians walking throughout the day, grabbing lunch, checking out art... it’s amazing what this area has gone through in only a few years.”

Tucked between I-95 and Biscayne Bay, the Wynwood Arts District is the most obvious manifestation of a thriving, ever-growing utopia of creative mavens, artistic entrepreneurs, and culture vultures who are changing the face of this city. Credit for this artistic renaissance is due, largely, to a 40-year-old art fair from a small city in Switzerland, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary as a Miami outpost from Dec. 1–4. Art Basel Miami Beach now

brings in more than 300 blue-chip galleries from all over the world, and attracts more than 50,000 international visitors to the city. There are now 15 adjacent contemporary-art fairs encapsulating the entire metropolis, from South Beach to downtown, and to the heart of the graffitied ghettos of Wynwood and Overtown.

“The Miami art community is going through an incredible decade,” says Dennis Scholl, a prominent collector and the vice president of arts for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. “Let’s face it, it’s an incredible change—a sea change, really—of what has happened down here in just a short span of time.”

Headquartered in Miami, Knight Foundation has provided \$40 million in national arts and culture funding for a diverse portfolio of genres, from a locally driven film festival to online music-promotion sites. A purebred Miamian, Scholl is considered by many to be the granddaddy of the city’s cultural growth. He believes what happened here “could not have happened anywhere else.”

Says Scholl, “Long before Basel, Miami had this wonderful confluence of a very good, working-artist community, up-and-

coming museums, and internationally renowned collectors with these public spaces showing their private collection,” says Scholl, who exudes a jolly, Yoda-like wisdom. “Now, Art Basel gets here, and it shines a very, very bright light on what’s already going on here. That became a light that helped sustain growth.”

If South Beach—with its stretches of white sand, sun-dappled pools, and over-the-top nightlife—never lacked for light, Art Basel’s gleam has certainly brought out a few additional glints. Along the pedestrian-only Lincoln Road, Frank Gehry’s given the New World Symphony a striking new building. At the other end of the road, Swiss star-architects Herzog & de Meuron have built a multistoried parking lot that (somewhat bizarrely) also hosts events and dinners.

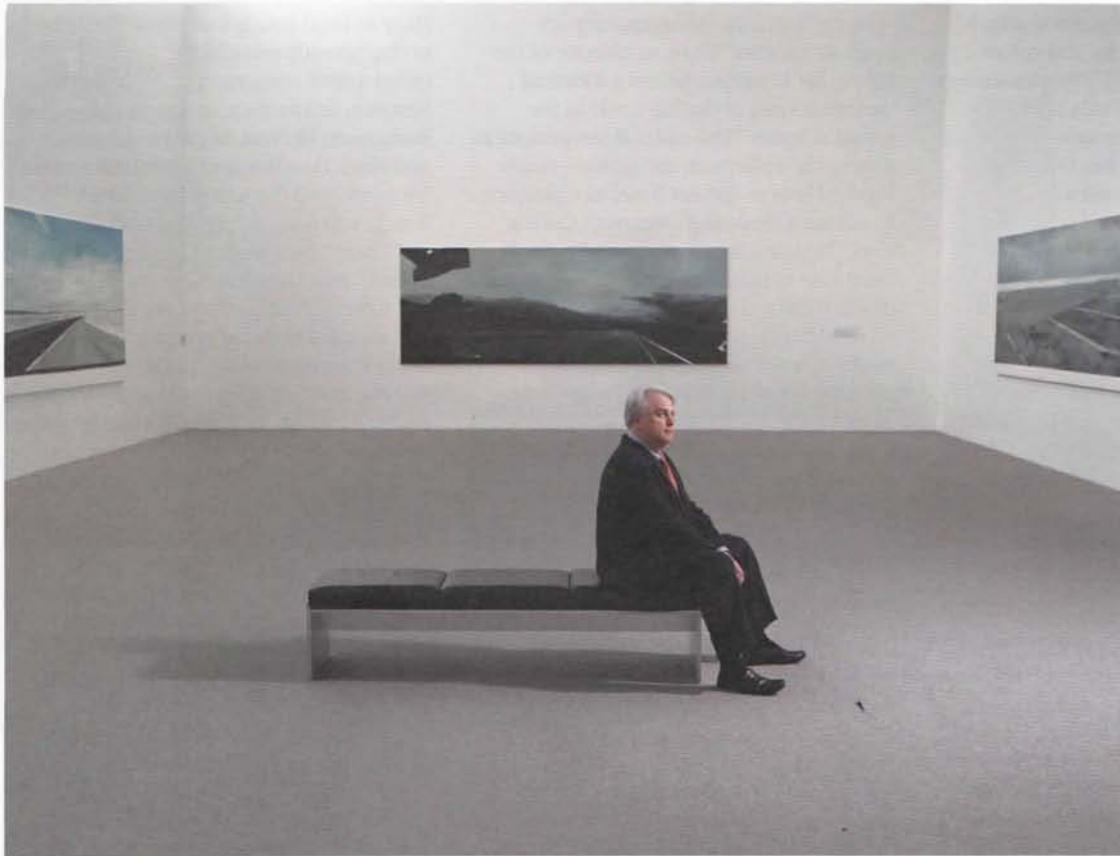
“All of this is a result of 10 years of people focusing on culture here in Miami, and you’re finally seeing a city that’s beginning to take itself seriously,” comments Scholl.

But it is across the Venetian Causeway from South Beach, past the decadent homes and yachts gracing the exclusive Venetian Islands, that Art Basel’s lasting legacy is most visible.




Aramis Lorié opened event space Grand Central in Miami’s oft-ignored Downtown in 2010. The presence of Art Basel’s tastemaking clientele encouraged him to push the city’s live-music scene in new directions.





Considered by many to be the granddaddy of Miami's cultural growth, collector Dennis Scholl believes the unique confluence of his city's working artists, and its up-and-coming museums enabled Miami to make the most of Art Basel.



 The Don Draper of the city's art scene, Thom Collins is a former Basel regular turned current director of the Miami Art Museum. "Before Basel, I didn't have a sense of Miami being a center of visual culture," he says.

The once-neglected Wynwood area is now bursting with galleries and colorful warehouse walls painted by world-class street artists, from Brazil's Os Gêmeos to Shepard Fairey. Only four miles south on North Miami Avenue lies Downtown, which just broke ground with a new, 120,000-square-foot home for the Miami Art Museum (also designed by Herzog & de Meuron), set to open in early 2013.

"The Basel experience doesn't speak to the true character of the city as a culturally productive center," says Thom Collins, a sort of art-world Don Draper, who manages to combine zen intelligence with an undeniable swag. "In fact, all the excess stuff that takes place during the fair—the parties, the dinners—all that simply dilutes what Miami truly has to offer as the leading international cultural destination of the Western Hemisphere."

These are truly bold words from a man whose first impression of Miami was based on little more than the cocktail-fueled South Beach exclusivity that is Art Basel Miami Beach. Collins, who previously served as the director of the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, N.Y., remembers coming to Art Basel's soft launch in December 2001, and "ping-

ponging from one contemporary-art event to another." Now, as director of the Miami Art Museum, he has a different understanding of the fair's role in the grand scheme. "The cultural institutions in town—the collectors, the artists—really learned how to use Art Basel as a platform to advance their own interests," Collins says. "In doing so, they have collectively been able to paint a more detailed picture of Miami as a cultural center."

Branding is just one of the fair's residual benefits. The past decade has seen the number of artists drawn to the city rise, thanks to Art Basel's high profile. Their studios and galleries now dot neighborhoods like Wynwood, where drug dealers once plied their trade and their clients stumbled in the streets.

Inside Lester's—a new makeshift café and bookshop located in the heart of Wynwood—Michael Vasquez sips from a glass of lukewarm Dogfish microbrew and looks pensive. "Honestly, the scene kinda started by accident," he says. "I don't think we knew what we were doing back then ... we were just doing what we do and will continue to do, regardless if [Art] Basel came or not."

Vasquez's "we" refers to a core of

10 or so local artists that Scholl described as the "already established, working visual artists' community." Along with Vasquez, artists such as Naomi Fisher, Bert Rodriguez, Hernan Bas, Daniel Arsham, and Mark Handforth experienced success far away from the glitterati of South Beach, and long before Art Basel's impact.

"There's two kinds of scenes for Miami artists," says Vasquez. "One scene is what I call the real scene—these are the galleries and visual artists that are producing real stuff. Then there's like ... a scene, sort of like our 2nd Saturday Art Walks—it's like a circus, a bad car accident. That's the scene that a lot of kids now are used to when they talk about the 'Miami Art Scene,' and that's not necessarily a good thing."

Vasquez takes a last swig of his beer and sighs. "Ten years ago, there was nothing here. There were literally two art galleries, and that was it," he says. "Now, there's a whole new generation of kids that are into art. There's a need for more galleries and places to hang out, and there's art everywhere—literally."

Vasquez points across the street to Wynwood Walls, a colorful mosaic of street art created by some of the world's best graffiti artists, and a red-hot tourist



One of the scene's established locals, Michael Vasquez's powerful portraits of ghetto characters have earned him plaudits and recognition beyond his city's borders. He's photographed here in his studio.

Wynwood's artist community is tight-knit. Daniel Milewski (left) exhibits his work at Gallery Diet with Nina Johnson (right), and is the owner of Lester's, a makeshift bookshop café that caters to the local community.



attraction since its Art Basel debut in 2009. "So this is now the Miami Art Scene. It's constantly expanding, moving forward—if this is the response to Basel, then so be it."

Yet Wynwood's growth appears to be largely organic, born of the area's tight-knit artist community. For example, Lester's was opened at the end of May by Daniel Milewski, who also exhibits at Gallery Diet, just a few blocks away. "It's always interesting to see the constant flow of people that come to Lester's on any given night," says Milewski. "We do a lot of original programming—like readings, lectures, DJs—but on those off-nights, we still get regulars that come through. That's just awesome to see that we really did strike a chord ... that there really is an audience hungry for a place like this."

From transformed warehouses to a downtown full of Art Deco and shimmering high-rises, an area largely ignored after dark now pulls a diverse crowd flocking to a 1920s-era railroad station called—aptly—Grand Central. Opened by the man dubbed the "Downtown Don," the music and events venue is part of Aramis Lorie's desire to expand the city's nightlife palette. On one night in late September, Australian

superband Cut Copy played Grand Central, a rarity in a city known for a music aesthetic drifting more toward Pitbull and David Guetta.

"Yeah, five years ago, Cut Copy wouldn't even consider playing in Miami," says Lorie, hidden under a scruffy, week-old beard and his signature Cuban fedora. "Now, we've got great musicians asking to perform, especially when Art Basel comes around." Last year's performances by Twin Shadows and The Brothers Macklovitch (DJ A-Trak and Chromeo's Dave 1) were the musical coup of Art Basel. "Last week, we had Peaches dressed up in her boob costume, just killing it to a packed house. Yeah, that was quite Basel-y," laughs Lorie.

The absurdity of Basel—a Swiss city best known for its beautiful old cathedral—being used as an adjective by a fedora-wearing nightlife impresario might be lost on Lorie. But there's no denying the benefit its tastemaker crowd has given his nightlife efforts. "From new money to new businesses to new residents, it has really made Miami a well-rounded city, y'know?" says Lorie. "Now, you can wake up, take a swim in the ocean, grab some amazing gourmet food, see some great art, do some expensive shopping, grab more great food,

then come here and have the best night of your life. What's not to like?"

Perhaps only that Basel's shining spotlight may soon be cast elsewhere. Perennial rumors that the art fair is looking for a new city to grace have increased ahead of its anniversary this year. "I think it would be stupid for Basel to not come back," Lorie continues. "And if they don't, Miami's already changed."

"We're 7 years old now... we've already got the world-class art centers; culture-wise, we've got a warehouse district now occupied by contemporary galleries, and affordable studios for artists to work in; music-wise, we've got live-music venues like Grand Central popping up everywhere; people-wise, we've got some of the most diverse group of transplants from all over the world moving here. And not to mention, the beautiful weather for eight months out of the year."

Lorie motions upward to the clear, Downtown Miami evening sky, and smiles. "Try going to Art Basel in December anywhere else in the States, and not freezing your ass off," he says. "Art Basel Cleveland just doesn't sound as sexy as Art Basel Miami Beach."

www.artbaselmiami.com