

Art Basel Miami

Art and parties in the winter sun

Dec 9th 2014, 14:13 BY R.U.



ART BASEL has just taken place in Miami for the 13th year in a row, further cementing its place as a December fixture on the international art scene. The organisers of the contemporary art fair estimate that 75,000 people turned up this year, contributing some \$13m to the local economy.

The fair attracts most of the top international galleries and more than a smattering of serious art investors; but its reputation has grown as much on the back of its parties as on its art works. Unlike its sibling fairs in Basel and Hong Kong, Art Basel Miami has cultivated a reputation as a glamorous social event where the creative elite from New York hob-nob with Hollywood celebrities, business A-listers and a host of miscellaneous party-goers. (Kim Kardashian and Miley Cyrus were among those attending this year.) Thanks to its loucheness, it has become an event where you could be forgiven for thinking the art was simply a sideshow amid a smorgasbord of sponsored parties, which turn the city into an expensively decorated theme park fuelled by champagne and hors d'oeuvre.

The Miami branch of this art franchise does also knuckle down to the serious business of displaying art. A broad mixture of contemporary, modern and historical exhibitions takes place over the course of a week, though the official event lasted from December 4th-7th. Most are found in conventional, grid-like formation at the Miami Beach Convention Centre, though the fair's reach has spread and it now includes over 30 satellite fairs dotted around town.

In this way, Art Basel is unlike the Frieze fairs of London and New York, which prefer to coral their art inside a single vast space. It is more of an art movement: a plethora of shows and temporary exhibitions that take over the city, from the posh Design Miami, a design exhibition close to the Convention Centre, to the young galleries showcased at the New Dealers Alliance (NADA) and the street art of Wynwood five miles away.

One off-site piece that drew a lot of attention this year was *Strandbeests* (pictured) by Theo Jansen, a Dutch artist. These enormous mechanical skeletons made of yellow PVC tubing and white sails seemed to move along the beach outside the W Hotel. Andra Ursuta's bold, mixed-medium installation at NADA and Ryan McNamara's digital-age-inspired ballet in the Design District were also hot tickets.

It is Wynwood that provides the best example of the upside of this artistic sprawl. A few years ago it was little more than a drug den where you had a better chance of getting shot than finding an edgy piece for the living room (even though a few galleries had already ventured into the neighbourhood). Now, with over 90 galleries, it looks like a big colourful exhibit: an oasis of low-rise buildings decorated with stunning graffiti. The Wynwood Walls are its centrepiece: an area where slow-moving street artists perform with "do not disturb" signs taped to their backs, deep in concentration.

Throughout all this, Miamians put up with the influx of cognoscenti and socialites with good humour. It does not matter that the traffic is snarled up and pretentious outsiders are flaunting their bulging bank accounts; this is a colourful pageant that not only bolsters the local economy but showcases genuine, creative talent. And with winter setting in elsewhere, the warm sunshine is fantastic. The city has come a long way from being the place where, as Lenny Bruce put it in the 1970s, "neon goes to die".