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Art

The Art Fair as Outlet Mall

By **KEN JOHNSON**

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — The most trenchant comment on the dazzling and enervating spectacle that is [Art Basel Miami Beach](#) is written in bold black and white letters on the floor of the Mary Boone Gallery booth. A wall-to-wall text piece by Barbara Kruger, it spells out two quotations. One, from Goethe, observes, “We are the slaves of objects around us.” The other, from a short story by [Edgar Allan Poe](#), reads, “He entered shop after shop, priced nothing, spoke no word, and looked at all objects with a wild and distracted stare.”

These lines truly sum up the experience of a frenetic fair that embraces more than 200 galleries and many ancillary exhibitions and events in other locations in the Miami area. To take in so much art in so short a time is by turns thrilling, numbing and totally mystifying. And that’s not to mention the schmooze storm of parties, business meetings, open houses and other private events orchestrated to charm the collector class.

The sense of art as merchandise is overpowering. A majority of what you see is portable and palatable. Most galleries offer variety-store-like mixes of works by different artists with the ambience of a sample sale.

Still, events like this do occasion collective soul-searching, especially now, as the art world grapples with recession. What is art for, after all, assuming that it is not just something for sale?

(By the way, the talk was not all gloom and doom. Dealers I spoke with said that collectors were buying, and that things were not turning out as disastrously as they had feared.)

A response to Ms. Kruger might point out that art objects are compelling because they embody nonobjective and nonmaterial meanings and values. A sculpture by John McCracken in David Zwirner’s space is apposite. A bronze monolith standing eight and a half feet tall and polished to a golden mirror-bright finish, it is an object of Minimalist reticence. Yet it incarnates certain aesthetic and spiritual values — ideals of purity and unity, for example — the way that gold bars

in Fort Knox embody abstract monetary values.

Still, art's social function is always ripe for renewed debate. The best work in Art Positions, a section of the fair in which galleries occupy shipping containers in an empty lot near the beach, is an installation at T293 by the French team that goes by the name Claire Fontaine. It consists of a crude sculpture of a blue horse, an obscure reference to a popular symbol of political liberation from the 1970s. The words "Is freedom therapeutic?" are spray-painted graffiti-style on the walls, while a poster poses the question, "Why is art the only space of expression for a luxurious and exclusive principle of reality that makes abnormality into a source of wealth and a desirable condition?"

Why, in other words, must the kind of radical creative freedom and idiosyncrasy we celebrate in modern art remain a commodity that only people of means can really afford?

So much depends on belief. Back at the main fair, in Hetzler's booth, there's a large glossy photograph by Thomas Struth in which two people are seen from behind, sitting in rapt contemplation of a triptych in the Rothko Chapel in Houston. To a Postmodernist skeptic, such quasi-religious reverence seems an amusing historic artifact.

Maybe that is why so many contemporary artworks toy with illusions. Playing in the gap between the believable and the unbelievable, they test our faith in the transcendently transformative power of art. A sculpture by Frank Benson at Taxter & Spengemann that looks to be a working fountain of liquid chocolate turns out to be an object of solid, glossily painted stainless steel. The tension between appearance and reality is curiously delightful.

At Sperone Westwater an oversize head-and-shoulder portrait of a grizzled middle-aged man in sculptural relief by Evan Penny is so realistic in every detail that you can't help feeling a part of your psyche responding as if it were in the presence of a supernaturally living being.

Recent paintings by Philip Taaffe at Jablonka, in which lattice patterns are layered over glowing colors, are like stained-glass windows for a psychedelic church. The spiritual in art may be contemplated with sophisticated criticality, but it doesn't go away, even if it comes bearing a vulgar price tag.

The fair by NADA, or New Art Dealers Alliance, abounds in works of imaginative metamorphosis. See, for example, the spooky confluences of abstraction and photographic distortion in sculptures by Ryan Johnson at Guild & Greyskul. And at the Pulse fair, also brimming with lively work by mostly younger artists, there is a tondo studded with blinking colored lights by Leo Villareal at Conner Contemporary Art that will put you into a hallucinogenic trance.

Videos are not so plentiful at the fairs, but there is a terrific one in a building that

the New York dealers Ronald Feldman and Joe Arnheim have filled with artworks by lots of artists. Two videos in which Kenneth Shorr tells stories that start out ordinary and become increasingly bizarre are riveting and frighteningly hilarious.

The most transporting single artwork on view in Miami, however, is not at any of the commercial fairs. It is an astounding installation in “The Station,” an exhibition organized by Shamim Momin, a curator at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#), and by the New York artist Nate Lowman. This lively, scruffy show occupies parts of three floors in a building still under construction in the Miami Design District and presents works by a familiarly trendy cast of characters, including Sterling Ruby, Hanna Liden, Ryan McGinley, Tom Burr and many others.

The piece that makes everything else there pale by comparison is “Hello Meth Lab With a View,” by Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe. Mr. Freeman and Mr. Lowe have created a walk-in simulation of the grungy interior of a house whose occupants have been producing crystal meth. You enter what appears to be a photography gallery and then continue into dark rooms where you behold an extraordinarily messy kitchen full of cobbled-together laboratory equipment.

Like Alice in a scary Wonderland, you continue through a dining room where the table is heaped with trash and packages of Sudafed and then upstairs to a claustrophobic warren of rooms where shelves are stocked with old jars of murky liquid, and where a couple of stuffed dogs are sleeping. Antique diagrams pinned to the walls suggest an equation between the heretical arts of the medieval alchemists and those of modern outlaw drug makers. Like the installations of Christoph Büchel, the work creates an obviously artificial but magically evocative virtual reality.

Yet as a kind of high-brow funhouse, it also does little to allay Claire Fontaine’s argument that modern art remains a playground for people of privilege.

Our attention is called more urgently to social and political reality by “30 Americans,” an exhibition at the Rubell Family Collection. What the title of this sprawling show of more than 200 works pointedly doesn’t say is that all the artists in it are of African descent. By this it means to anticipate a time when the racial identity of the United States president-elect will no longer be deemed remarkable.

The show includes several generations of artists who have come of age since the 1960s, including David Hammons, Robert Colescott, [Barkley L. Hendricks](#), [Kara Walker](#), Rashid Johnson and Kalup Linzy. No single style prevails: conceptualist photography, expressionist painting, comic video, abstract sculptures, flamboyant costumes and other modes engender a spirit of pluralistic freedom and open-ended possibility.

If any one piece in the show could be taken as emblematic, it would be a neon

sign spelling “America” in large letters by Glenn Ligon. The glowing white tubing has been painted black on the front but not the back, so that the letters appear backlit by white light, a neat metaphorical reversal of our nation’s historical racial landscape and an eloquent testimony to the poetic power of the well-formed object.

Art Basel Miami Beach runs through Sunday at Miami Beach Convention Center, Halls A and D, 1901 Convention Center Drive, Miami Beach, Fla.; artbaselmiami.com.



“Murray Variation 3,” a head-and-shoulder portrait by Evan Penny of a grizzled middle-aged man, is realistic in every detail. Photo: Barbara P. Fernandez for The New York Times