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In Miami, culture begets more culture with Art Basel arrival

By Lydia Martin
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Curator Gloria Porcella positions a pink turtle during installation of Foreverglades on Wednesday, November 28, 2012. The sculptures made of recyclable materials are placed inside and affixed to the outside of the Freedom Tower. It's part of an eco-sensitive exhibition, Foreverglades, that will be on display at MDC during Art Basel Miami Beach.

On one of those delicious November evenings in Miami, with a shimmering new skyline casting its magic over a happening stretch of downtown that even a decade ago was unimaginable, a cross section of the local arts community toasted the latest sign of progress for a city making strides toward cultural maturity.

Here they were, three short weeks before the 11th Art Basel Miami Beach, which opens this week at the Miami Beach Convention Center and is a magnet for dozens of other art fairs and glitzy events. Many were slammed with deadlines related to their involvement in some aspect of the contemporary art fair called the most important in the world. But they carved out time to gather on the broad plaza of the historic former Bacardi headquarters to

celebrate its planned rebirth as a Frank Gehry-designed campus for the National YoungArts Foundation.

For a city starting to come into its own, the project has the power to be transformational. While the Swiss-run Art Basel has proved a major force in elevating Miami's creative and cultural life, and other outside influences have helped push the city forward over time, the YoungArts announcement highlights Miami's growing maturity as homegrown leaders, cultural institutions and corporations find fresh, vital ways to give back.

"The new YoungArts will end up being another Juilliard," says Lourdes Lopez, the Cuban-born former principal dancer for New York City Ballet who was recently named artistic director for Miami City Ballet. "I left Miami when I was 14 to dance. I came back regularly to visit family. But when you visit family, you're hanging out at home. It was after I was first approached by the ballet that I came to understand how much Miami had grown culturally. I was floored."

Established in 1981 by Carnival Cruise Lines founder Ted Arison and his wife, Lin, YoungArts has long been a national force for nurturing talented kids who have gone on to be A-list dancers, visual artists, writers, musicians, actors and more. The plan to turn the 3.3-acre Bacardi property at 2100 Biscayne Blvd. into a multi-disciplinary arts campus that will also offer year-round public exhibitions and performances promises to help sew together a swiftly developing urban core.

By next year's Art Basel, the Miami Art Museum's architecturally acclaimed new home will open 11 blocks south of the Bacardi campus in the 29-acre Museum Park, which will also be the site of the new Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science. Along with its new home, the museum will get a new name, PAMM, Perez Art Museum Miami, in honor of the gift of \$35 million in art and cash by real-estate developer Jorge Perez. He, like the Frosts, made much of his fortune in Miami.

PAMM will join downtown's Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, on line since 2006. Nearby stands the historic Freedom Tower, donated by another Cuban-American developer, Terra Group's Pedro Martin, to Miami Dade College in 2005, which has transformed it into a nexus for cultural programming and exhibitions.

On the east side of the bay is the Gehry-designed home for the New World Symphony, an instant landmark for South Beach when it opened in early 2011 (Lin Arison and her late husband, Ted, co-founded the symphony in 1987 with conductor Michael Tilson Thomas; the Arison family was one of the financial forces behind the new center off Lincoln Road).

Not just beach fun

Add to these advances the continued growth of the gallery-centric Wynwood; the sprouting of the hip Midtown Miami neighborhood out of nothing but a dusty old rail yard; and the makeover of the adjacent Design District into a subtropical Rodeo Drive, anchored by luxury retailers such as Louis Vuitton, Cartier, Hermes and Christian Dior. Over the past decade or so, the city has morphed into a place where public and private museums thrive, theater companies are deepening their offerings and live music venues are finding their footing, thanks in part to a growing number of homegrown bands fusing conga, compas and cumbia with jazz, funk and rock.

"Miami has a new sensibility. Nobody thinks of it anymore as just a place where people go looking for beach and fun and parties," says Javier Duero, artistic director for the Madrid-based JustMad MIA, one of the new satellite art fairs that will join a dozen or so others during Basel this year. It opens Dec. 6 at Soho Studios in Wynwood.

Culture is begetting more culture. Art more art. Desmond Richardson, a YoungArts alum who went on to be a principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the American Ballet Theater, said he was inspired by the YoungArts move to start plotting a relocation to Miami of the New York-based Complexions Contemporary Ballet company, which he co-founded in 1994.

"I came to Miami for the first time when I was 17 to participate in YoungArts. Here I am in my 40s and YoungArts is still in my life," says Richardson, who hopes to find a space near the organization's new home within the next couple of years.

Also feeling the pull of a more sophisticated Miami is Joe Berardo, one of Portugal's wealthiest tycoons and owner of one of the most valued modern and contemporary art collections in the world. A portion of the collection, which includes pieces by Bacon, Calder, Dali, Magritte, Mondrian, Picasso and Warhol (an estimated \$700 million worth of masterworks arrived in Miami for Basel week inside 14 shipping containers) will be shown at the Gary Nader gallery in Wynwood through March.

But Berardo, who in 2007 saw the opening of the Berardo Collection Museum in Lisbon, is considering making a more permanent contribution to Miami. If another entity is willing to pay to house it, he would think about giving the city his vast Art Deco collection, he says.

"You have done so much for your city in three or four years. I was so surprised by the new symphony building, by the new baseball stadium," says Berardo, who traveled here recently after a several-year hiatus to work out the details of his exhibition at the Nader gallery.

"And I have to congratulate the people of Miami who preserved so much of the Art Deco there. My dream is to have an Art Deco museum either in Miami or Rio. And I love Miami, my wife loves Miami, my daughter and my son love Miami."

Pirates and drugs

Many others in the deep-pocket set are newly smitten.

"A lot of my New York friends are now buying property in Miami, up one side and down the other," says Adrienne Arsht, whose \$30 million gift in 2008 helped right the city's struggling new performance arts center that now bears her name.

In early November, New York's Lincoln Center named the stage at Alice Tully Hall after Arsht in honor of her \$10 million gift. "I'm talking about some of the wealthiest, most prominent New Yorkers buying homes in Miami. Some years ago, they wouldn't have been caught dead in Miami. They thought it was pirates and drug dealers."

Not that Arsht, who moved to Miami in 1996 to be chair of TotalBank, ever saw the city as a palm tree-lined cliché.

"When I moved here, the Florida Grand Opera was flourishing, the New World Symphony was flourishing. There was already much in place. When I made my gift to the performing arts center, everybody said it was a white elephant. But now it's secure. That's a function of a city growing up."

The Knight Foundation, which was born in Ohio in 1950 and moved to Miami in 1990, has in recent years emerged as a prime mover for Miami's cultural ascension (it always operated independently of the newspapers once owned by the Knight family, including The Miami Herald). In six years, it has pledged \$86 million to boost Miami's museums, performance arts groups and other cultural institutions, while also providing grants to numerous individual artists.

"I keep calling what's happening in Miami a renaissance. But this isn't about a city being reborn," says the Knight Foundation's Dennis Scholl, vice president/arts. "Miami is still very young. We didn't have paved roads 100 years ago. What we're in the middle of is a

cultural enlightenment. People are attaching to the community like never before. That's joyful."

As a young cultural center plugging away to reach true world-class status, Miami still has miles to go. The gallery scene may continue proliferating in the Wynwood area, for example, but many galleries are short-lived and the quality of their offerings can be spotty.

"The city is at a tipping point. But a lot more has to happen," says Fred Snitzer, one the town's most successful art dealers, who nine years ago moved his longtime gallery from Coral Gables to Wynwood but now wants out. He recently sold his Wynwood building and is looking for a space near YoungArts.

"We need to establish a visual arts MFA [master's of fine arts] program as a way to attract interesting young artists from other places, and the galleries in town need to find more rigor."

For all the buzz around gallery walks that lure hundreds of the young and hip to Wynwood monthly, it's also true that some of the more serious galleries in the 'hood are growing wary of the carnival atmosphere, which in the end doesn't produce many sales and keeps serious collectors away.

But youthfulness is a key piece of Miami's promise, many say.

"I see tremendous opportunity. I see an openness, a community that doesn't judge you by where you came from or who your parents are but rather by what you can bring to it," said Lopez of the Miami City Ballet.

For years she tried to get approval for her acclaimed dance company Morphoses to put on a "flash mob" performance in Manhattan. She never pulled it off. But within a few weeks of taking the helm of Miami's ballet this fall, she arranged, with help from the Knight Foundation, for a crowd of the company's dancers to suddenly bust out in a performance from Paul Taylor's Piazzolla Caldera during a Wynwood gallery walk.

"It was one of the most exciting moments, even of my whole career," she said. "I couldn't believe the ease with which it happened. In New York, everything is too entrenched. There is just too much bureaucracy."

Stories to tell

Says Thom Collins, director of MAM: "We don't have to drag old institutions into the 21st century here. We are creating institutions that are very much of this moment.

"With the [flexible] design of our new museum, we'll be able to tell lots of stories lots of different ways."

For folks who remember the city when it was called a cultural wasteland, its seemingly overnight metamorphoses are almost dizzying.

"Every time I come over the causeway from Miami Beach and I see that new skyline I'm amazed," says acclaimed New York-based artist Michelle Oka Doner, a Miami Beach

native whose father, Kenneth Oka, was the Beach's mayor in the late 1950s and early '60s.

"We looked like a wannabe city before. Now we have critical mass. And we're not an old brick-and-mortar city. We're a glass city. This is just the beginning. We're the first city of the 21st century. And we're now cooking on all burners."

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