

Momentum building in Miami's new arts frontier: Downtown

By Jordan Levin

jlevin@MiamiHerald.com



MARICE COHN BAND / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Sisters Monica Adler, left, and Tasha Lopez De Victoria, of TM Sisters, work on their installation "Prizmavolt" in their studio at Downtown Arthouse/Dimensions Variable studio, 100 NE 11th St., a building sponsored by developers Miami WorldCenter.

For five years, visual artists Leyden Rodriguez Casanova and Frances Trombly were happily ensconced in a rent-free studio in the Design District, adding to the cachet that helped the neighborhood boom as a cultural destination.

As their landlord and patron, developer Craig Robins, began transforming the area into a luxury shopping destination, the couple went looking for a new home. They tried Miami Beach, Wynwood and Little River before moving last summer to Miami's next cultural frontier: Downtown.

Their studio-gallery, Dimensions Variable, is an anchor tenant in the DWNTWN Arthouse, a 20,000-square-foot building just south of the I-395 overpass on Northeast First Avenue. Its owner, Miami Worldcenter, a high-end residential-retail complex planned for the Park

West warehouse district, welcomed the couple and other artists and galleries with free rent for two years. The company hopes that tenants like Casanova, Trombly and fellow Design District refugees Naomi Fisher, Jim Drain and their nonprofit Bas Fisher Invitational gallery will generate the same kind of attention and excitement that made areas north of downtown hipster hot spots.

Casanova and Trombly know they're being used, but say the relationship works both ways.

An exchange

"It seems like a lot of [artists] take on the victimization in this narrative, but there's an exchange happening here, Casanova says. "We're able to produce work in a space that would cost money otherwise, and have more funds to put into our work and the community."

The familiar cycle of gentrification has played out in Coconut Grove, South Beach, the Design District and Wynwood. Artists move into rundown areas, lured by cheap rent and empty space. Their energy and creativity lure crowds, followed by developers, chain stores and rising real-estate values, which send the artists looking for the next cheap and happening neighborhood.

The latest version of this narrative is playing out a little differently, as developers and civic leaders seek out artists not only to encourage gentrification but to enhance downtown Miami's profile as an arts center.

The process gains momentum this season as two cultural pillars, Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus and the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, are joined by the Perez Art Museum Miami, which opens in December, and the National YoungArts Foundation, which launches live programming at its new Bacardi Building home in November.

With three dozen buildings and more than 9,000 housing units in the works, the area is in the middle of a real estate boom. And the Downtown Development Authority has embraced the arts as an essential part of the mix.

"The first goal of the DDA's master plan is to enhance downtown's position as a business and cultural center of the Americas," says Sonja Bogensperger, who heads the agency's effort to boost the arts in downtown.

"To enhance and position Miami as a cultural center is the next logical step. There is a creative ecosystem downtown that is unique... and that will change the way the world looks at Miami."

PAMM's role

The Perez Art Museum opens during Art Basel with a performance and installation by the West Coast group Los Jaichackers and an exhibit by famed Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei. With terraces overlooking Biscayne Bay and Museum (formerly Bicentennial) Park and an extensive slate of live programming, PAMM aims to be an important part of downtown – and Miami's cultural life, says Emily Mello, deputy director of education and public programming.

"Any major city wants to have organizations and institutions that respond to the local public and to the larger global community," says Mello. "Museums and arts organizations can really reflect the identity of a city. I think our part of that is ... [that PAMM] becomes a permanent location for the exchange of ideas that are progressive, innovative and social."

Miami Dade College was a cultural pioneer when it launched Miami Book Fair International at the Wolfson Campus in the 1980s. It has extended its reach by turning the historic Freedom Tower into a headquarters for live arts programming and the Miami Film Festival International as well as a visual-arts gallery and venue for speakers from Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez to First Lady Michelle Obama.

"We seized the opportunity to make it a cultural center, but also to make it the center of what we envisage the community to be in the next five years," says Alina Interian, MDC's senior executive director of cultural affairs. "There is this renewed excitement in the downtown community, and we are reflecting that."

A monthly listing of arts happenings published by the DDA has doubled from 50 to 100 events in the past year. A centerpiece of the agency's efforts is Downtown Art Days, an annual weekend of art openings, tours, performances, public art projects and other events that winds up its second edition today.

The DDA's Bogensperger introduced the Arthouse artists to the owners of Miami Worldcenter.

“We started getting calls from artists looking for space, who were attracted by [PAMM], and we started making calls, and introducing them to developers,” she says. “Mostly they say, ‘I get it, let’s do something.’ ”

Stepping around homeless men huddled in the sparse shade along Northeast Seventh Street, Bogensperger heads toward the new home of Primary Projects, a former Design District gallery that sponsored many of the murals that fill Wynwood. Inside, paint-splattered co-owner Books Bischof is preparing the space, also provided rent free by Miami Worldcenter, for its debut this weekend.

“Downtown is where it’s at,” says Bischof. “Everyone was asking, ‘Where are we gonna go?’ Everyone was looking for a new area. But I think Miami was always looking for a downtown city area.”

Among the more enthusiastic business supporters of the arts is Sean McCormick, whose family has filled McCormick Place, a former U.S. Customs warehouse on the Miami River, with a design firm and artist studios. He is hoping that young, affluent, culture-hungry downtown residents will flock there for the First Friday Art Walks he’s started.

“Ultimately I see a shift happening here in downtown, these residential towers filling up with high-end renters or owners and a niche that needs to be filled,” McCormick says. “Wynwood does a fantastic job, but it’s been pricing a lot of these art endeavors out. I see it burning out there and I think it’s all going to come downtown.”

A patchwork

The area is still a patchwork, with independent artists and groups trickling into empty spaces around the big institutional building blocks of PAMM, YoungArts, the Arsht Center and the Freedom Tower.

On North Miami Avenue, just around the corner from the Arthouse, is the Cisneros Fontanel Art Foundation, the music club Grand Central, a skate park and Cannonball, a nonprofit that provides artist studios and meeting space. Executive Director Chris Cook says interest has grown since Cannonball arrived in 2010 because of, not despite, the gritty landscape of parking lots and industrial warehouses.

“Having that openness and unclaimed territory, that sense of potential is really inspiring because it allows people’s imaginations to run a little wild,” Cookman says. “They feel like they can actually accomplish something.”

YoungArts President and CEO Paul Lehr says the foundation was lured to the Bacardi complex by its striking architecture and the opportunity it presents for year-round performances and activities. Architect Frank Gehry is designing a multi-disciplinary arts complex that will include a park and wallcast facilities similar to the ones he created for the New World Symphony in Miami Beach. A café and jazz club that will be a venue for YoungArts student musicians and guest artists will launch Nov. 22 with a concert by classical guitarist Milos Karadaglic.

Lehr says the range of groups downtown, from YoungArts and PAMM to small galleries, is creating a crucial synergy.

“We all build on each other,” he says. “When we started announcing what we were doing, I started getting lots of calls and emails saying, ‘If you’ll be there, I want to be there too.’”

If downtown development follows the usual course, artists will be priced out and looking for affordable space in a few years. But Casanova, for one, is hopeful.

“My optimistic side hopes that we would at least have the ear of the people building Miami for the future to maintain the level of creativity in these neighborhoods that are being developed,” he says. “If people come together, maybe they can figure something out, find a way to keep working artists in the neighborhood without following the same formula of gentrification.”