

# MIAMI

## Letter from Miami

My flight from New York to Miami was dominated by Nicole's bachelorette party. I'm not acquainted with said bride-to-be, but she and her excitable entourage identified themselves very clearly via matching custom-printed T-shirts and raucous behaviour. Clearly, Miami – sun-worshippers' Miami Beach is what most holidaymakers mean when they use the name – retains its longstanding reputation as a party town, a reputation on which the peripatetic international art world has been only too happy to capitalise since the establishment of Art Miami in 1990, Art Basel Miami Beach in 2002 and Design Miami in 2005. But the 'Gateway to the Americas' has proved far from invulnerable to the effects of the global financial crisis, and its unwelcome status as a hotspot for urban crime stands firm.

In town to oversee the installation of 'How to Read a Book', an exhibition I curated for established not-for-profit gallery Locust Projects (one of precious few such institutions in the American South-East), I was able to observe Miami's creative community during a period when international art fair attention was focused elsewhere. Among the artists, curators and collectors I encountered (critics are a rarer breed), a common theme was the scene's familial air. One contributing factor to this perceived intimacy is doubtless the galleries' proximity; most (David Castillo Gallery, Gallery Diet, Dorsch Gallery and Fredric Snitzer Gallery are pre-eminent) are clustered in the city's Wynwood neighbourhood, with a few – including Dimensions Variable and Spinello Gallery – adjoining Locust in the nearby Design District. But there is also a leisurely, island-like feel to the place that makes networking a cinch but can induce cabin fever.

'Miami is a crazy place,' confirmed artist Naomi Fisher during my visit to her studio. 'Growing up here in the 1980s it was part *Scarface* and part burgeoning fashion scene, part tourist trap and part retiree village. And it was an insane place to be female. Almost every interesting woman I know who grew up here got out as soon as they could.' Undeterred, Fisher stuck around and in 2004 teamed up with artist Hernan Bas to establish the artist-run alternative space Bas Fisher Invitational. ('We thought our names put together sounded like a fishing tournament – we added "Invitational" to reflect that.') When Bas moved on, artist Jim Drain took

over as co-director and, with a timely boost in the form of a grant from the James S and John L Knight Foundation, the gallery is still a Design District fixture.

Bas Fisher also relies on the largesse of Miami real-estate developer Craig Robins, whose company Dacra controls much of the area's property. (Robins garnered art-market headlines in New York recently for his lawsuit against superdealer David Zwirner over allegations of a blacklist controlled by artist Marlene Dumas forbidding collectors who resold her paintings from buying new work – Artlaw AM337.) Robins is the one name that's bound to crop up in any conversation about contemporary art in Miami and it would be churlish to deny his influence as a facilitator, but he is not the only local enthusiast possessed of a philanthropic streak. To the new arrival, at least, collectors appear to exercise a far more visible influence on the Miami scene than do their counterparts elsewhere. Kathryn and Dan Mikesell, for example, own and administer the Fountainhead Residency (at which I stayed), rent out studios and support numerous other enterprises. And it is telling that locals and guidebooks alike often recommend visiting one of the major private collections that are open to the public – the Rubell Family Collection, the de la Cruz Collection, the Margulies Collection – before the city's 'real' museums, the Miami Art Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami or the Bass Museum of Art.

This is not, however, to condemn the latter as lacking in either ambition or smarts. The Bass, incongruously located amid the cosmetically enhanced celebrities and wannabes of South Beach, appointed Silvia Karman Cubiñá as executive director and chief curator in 2008. Previously, Cubiñá was the founding director of the Moore Space, a well-regarded project room founded by Robins and Rosa de la Cruz. On my visit to the museum, displays included some great work from La Colección Jumex and a new project by New York-based Mika Tajima. And at MoCA, Ceal Floyer's first solo US museum exhibition, curated by executive director and chief curator Bonnie Clearwater, was paired with Cory Arcangel's 'The Sharper Image' (also a US solo museum debut) organised by associate curator Ruba Katrib.

While Miami lacks the critical infrastructure of a New York or a London, some individuals are making concerted efforts to commentate on goings-on around town. Filmmakers Grela

Orihuela and Bill Bilowit, operating under the Wet Heat Project banner, craft highly watchable interview-based art-world documentary series such as *Miami Heights* and *Studio Drive-By*. And in print, Gean Moreno's [NAME] Publications is engaged in producing books on artists and experimental designers. According to Moreno, 'The books are conceived on the model of alternative venues, in that I came up with a generic format and allow the invited artists and designers to do whatever they want with it, without editorial intrusion.' Two volumes in the 'Miami Artists' series have been produced so far: Daniel Newman's *WWW*, a spoof encyclopedia, and Beatriz Monteavaro's *Quiet Village*, a journal of drawings and notations packaged with a music CD. A third book, Nicolas Lobo's *Album Graphics*, is imminent.

As well as being immersed in his own practice, Lobo is fascinated by Miami's subcultural elements – it is, for example, the pirate radio capital of the US – and underground personalities. Prominent among the latter is Serge Toussaint, a street artist whose work appears throughout the city's Little Haiti district, often in the form of business signage. 'He's not interested in making canvas paintings,' Lobo explained to me during a studio visit, 'so anyone who wants to get involved with him commercially tends to get turned off. His work often crops up in the background of music videos, but he's angry about that because he never gets paid or credited. And he's very Haitian-centric. He's often commissioned to paint controversial Haitian political figures who he wouldn't be allowed to paint in Haiti itself.' Heading home, I found myself in broad agreement with Fisher's half-horrified, half-gleeful assessment of Miami as 'so superficial on so many levels, but with a dark undercurrent of complete weirdness ...'. ■

**MICHAEL WILSON** is an independent critic and curator based in Brooklyn, New York.