



SHOCK AND AWE

My amazing visit to Planet Art Basel Miami Beach

BY BOB KODZIS

I love great art. It moves my soul. It changes the way I see the world and myself. It makes me laugh, cry and think. Most of all, great art inspires me to create.

That's why I jumped at the chance to attend Art Basel Miami Beach, the truly astounding international modern art show which displays the diverse art collections of 200 galleries and more than 2,000 artists from across the globe.

It's much more than an art show. It's an art experience. In addition to an amazing plethora of new and original visual artwork, Art Basel offers a number of fascinating venues through which art patrons can watch, discuss and in some cases even participate in the creation of art.

It is an art lover's paradise and I am ready for some sensory stimulation.

First thing's first

I start my journey by going through a quick and painless media credentialing process. As I enter the media queue, I am immediately struck by the wide range of spoken languages and ethnic skin tones surrounding me. If the diversity of the media crew is any indication of the variety of works on display here, this is going to be a very mind-opening experience. I shuffle forward in this media Ellis Island answering questions and signing documents in the hopes of getting my press papers. Little do I know that I have arrived, not in a new country, but on a whole new planet.

Within minutes I have my photo ID and 17 pounds of information about the artists, galleries and exhibits. Feeling a bit like a newly laden burro, I amble toward the turnstiles that lead to Exhibit Hall D. Bring on the art!

Losing my artistic innocence...

The first artist I encounter is a small, elaborately costumed French man. I guess him to be in his late '60s. His striped, knitted skull cap clings to his shoulder-length gray hair. His oversized, red-framed glasses magnify his small brown eyes and the network of wrinkles that betray his age. He wears a royal blue vest over a bright red sweater with white pants and sparkling ruby red shoes. The boldly patterned scarf around his neck may have seemed a bit too much if not for the fact that it complimented every other color he was wearing. This is a very colorful character in every sense of the term.

His art is a series of small red briefcases bursting at the seams with a string of quaint and very original paper dresses on tiny hangers. I casually flip through them marveling at the range of ideas. Some are

made from bubble wrap, some from butcher's paper, others newspaper and still others chicken wire. As I am perusing these whimsical miniature dresses, I encounter one that makes me stop in my tracks. It bears a graphic photo of a nude man's hairy torso adorned with a dark ladder of surgical staples lining a long, deep incision that runs from his naval to his sternum. POW! That was not what I expected to see. The artist smiles at my moment of shock.

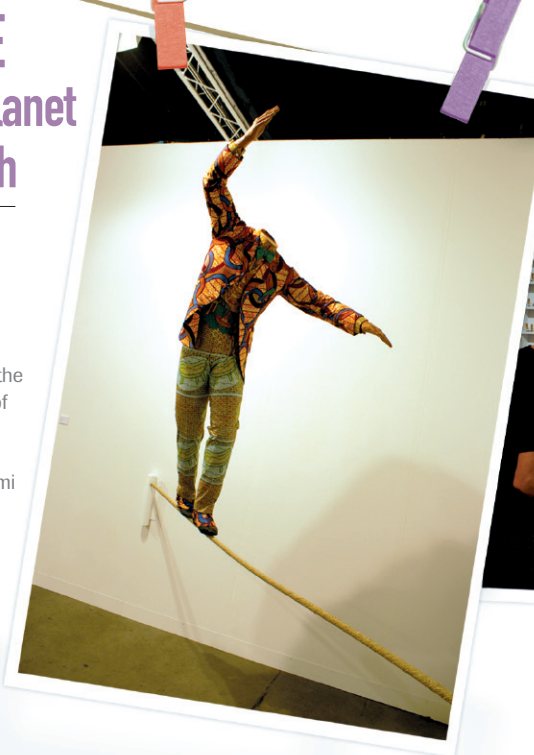
Toto, we are not in Kansas anymore. Thus begins my first experience with the artistic acid trip that is Art Basel Miami Beach.

Over-stimulated

The exhibit is so enormous that it seems hard to wrap my brain around its breadth and depth. It fills two halls of the humungous Miami Beach Convention Center. I am accustomed to getting this kind of stimulation in much smaller doses.

Each of the more than 200 participating galleries customizes its space, immersing visitors in its unique artistic vision. Some put up new walls and paint them. Others tiled, floored and added ceilings. Elaborate installations of art are everywhere. The broad range of ever-changing colors and moods makes me understand what it must feel like to experience life with multiple personalities.

I am close enough to touch the works of Picasso, Renoir, Miro and Warhol. There are hundreds of new artists and fresh works that I've never seen before. Every corner exposes a new treasure to behold. I feel the urge to run toward works that move me. The excited look in my eyes makes the gallery owners nervous. I see myself as a kid in a candy store; they see a bull in a china shop.



Images courtesy of Bob Kodzis.

Are you interesting in buying or just looking?

The gallery folks are an interesting bunch. They generally fall into one of two categories: the "Accessibles" and the "Art-Holes."

The Accessibles are a wonderful bunch of art experts who seem happy to answer questions and teach visitors about the tools, histories and intentions of their showcased artists. Through the generosity of these knowledgeable souls, I walk away a more informed art junkie.

The Art-Holes, on the other hand, are a different breed. They know as much as the Accessibles, but they are far less willing to share their knowledge. A number of these self-superior art sellers have mastered the art of showing their distaste for anything they perceive to be "art ignorance." They do this using mostly nonverbal skills.

"The exhibit is so enormous that it seems hard to wrap my brain around..."

My first encounter with an Art-Hole comes when I ask about a sculpture of a jade green glass skeleton hovering horizontally two feet from the floor with two thick tresses of long black hair hanging above its skull. "What's the significance of the hair?" I ask. Rather than respond to my query, the gallery owner simply tilts his head, slides his \$300 Gucci glasses down his nose and squeezes his face into a pained expression that seems to say "I've got a live toad in my mouth."

I refuse to let the Art-Holes get me down. There is just too much originality, color and courage on display to feel anything but awe and wonder (with maybe an occasional dash of sarcasm).

Meeting a master

My art buddy for the day is a good friend and a true patron of the arts. He can tell, with a glance at the work, the name of the artist responsible for each piece. I am thankful to have such a knowledgeable and patient cohort in art. In fact, if it weren't for her keen eye, I might have missed meeting Dale Chihuly, the legendary glass master. He is chatting in front of an eight-foot tall glowing statue of a nude man hugging his knees. He's very recognizable with his short thick stature, his wild throw of curly silver hair and his simple black eye patch. His wide black leather boots are covered with spatters of amazingly vibrant colors. They may be his work boots, but they are art unto themselves.

I decide I can't let this moment pass without at least saying hello to a living legend, so I approach Chihuly and tell him how much I love his work and admire his creativity. He says thank you with the enthusiasm of a toll collector; not even a hint of a smile. He seems impatient and abruptly turns and walks away.

The moment is over, but my spirits are soaring. I got to shake the hand of a true artistic master ... and I'm pretty sure that something rubbed off on me. No, I haven't started blowing glass masterpieces, but I have been sniffing and coughing since I got home. And, oddly enough, when I sneeze, it comes out "Ah-Chihuly!"

How much for this one?

As we wander in a zigzag pattern through the hundreds of showrooms, I notice that many of the works on display bear red "sold" stickers which makes me wonder how much some of these pieces cost. I ask the price of only one item. It's a dull white orb attached to a rotor that causes it to spin

at high speed from below. It's kind of cool and looks like a warped light bulb as it spins. I mention casually to two other art lovers that I'd like to see what it looks like when it's not spinning. A man in a neat black suit hurries over and clicks off the power. When it whirrs to a stop, it looks exactly like an oddly bent coat hanger.

I can't help myself. I ask "How much for this one?" He says \$60,000, but I can't hear him clearly. I ask, "Did you say *sixteen* thousand or *sixty* thousand dollars?"

"Six zero," he enunciates with exaggerated emphasis, and I catch a whiff of toad on his breath.

What does it mean to you?

Although I cannot explain the pricing structure, so much of this art is truly astounding in both idea and execution. I love the piece called "Pool Pool" by a Cuban duo known as Los Carpinteros. It's the size and shape of a pool table, but it has been meticulously tiled and sculpted into a real, working, miniature pool, complete with ladders, a deep end and 150 gallons of water. My first reaction is to laugh, but my second and more permanent response is awe. These talented artists took this simple and clever idea and brought it to life with amazing detail and skill.

"Art is in the eye of the beholder ... I am beholding my own."

I am also taken by a small installation piece created by Lithuanian artist Zilvinas Kempinas. It is a large loop of audiotape hovering and spinning between two electric fans. It is not as splashy as many of the other pieces, but I am momentarily mesmerized by the perpetual motion and the delicate balance between the open-air freedom of the tape and the gentle control of the fans. Cool stuff. My art buddy does not understand why I spend so much time looking at this simple art of physics and I can only reply that, like the hovering tape itself, it grabbed me and held me, if only for a moment.

I cannot explain why I like what I like, but in this environment I don't feel a need to justify my choices. Art is in the eye of the beholder, and in this world, I am beholding my own.

I pass dozens of attractive works that look like alien molecular structures of every size, color and shape. None of them speaks to me. They are beautiful and I'm sure it took amazing talent to bring them to life, but they failed to connect with anything inside me, so I move quickly past them.

I come upon a piece by master provocateur, Damien Hirst. Hirst is a British artist who is known for creating art that starts conversations and in some cases controversy. The work I encounter is a wide, flat cabinet that houses thousands of snuffed cigarette stubs all glued in meticulous rows on 15 narrow shelves. There is nothing pretty about it. I seek out the title of this half-smoked work of art. The name of the piece is "A love that lasts a life time."

I laugh. Having grown up in a billow of secondhand smoke, this one hits close to home. I have no idea if my interpretation of this art matches

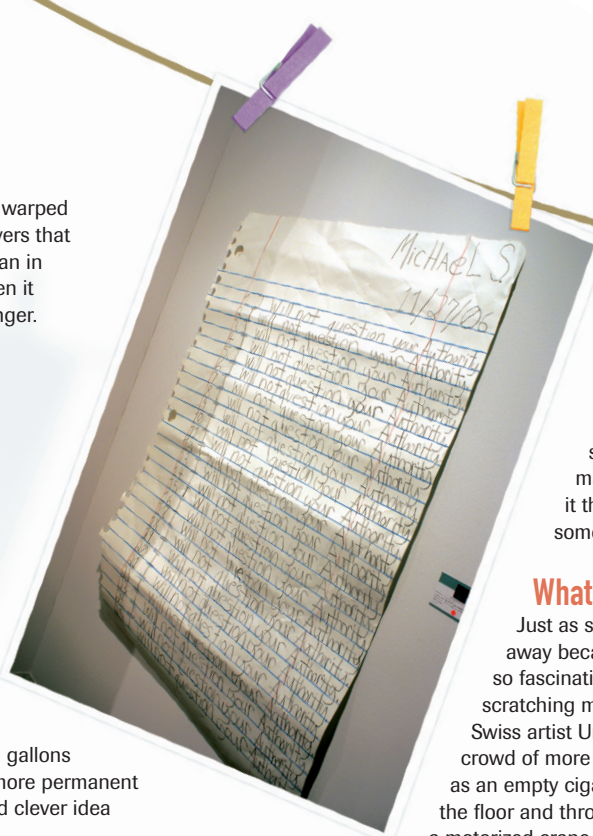


Image courtesy of Bob Kodzis.

the intent of the artist, but somehow, I don't think that matters. I got something from it that was meaningful and somehow personal.

What the ... ?

Just as some of the art blows me away because it is so original and so fascinating, other pieces leave me scratching my head. One such work, by Swiss artist Urs Fischer, has a perpetual crowd of more than 100 spectators watching as an empty cigarette box is dragged along the floor and through the air in a wide circle by a motorized crane. I am inspired to question, as I've done so many times during Art Basel, "What is art, really?" As I watch the observers converse about the meaning of this animated artifact I think perhaps the empty pack of Camels isn't the art; maybe the audience's reaction is the true art here.

People art

I approach the end of the exhibits at Art Basel with a greater focus on the audience and I once again become aware of the incredible diversity of this throng of patrons. In the end, I was one of more than 40,000 people, from every continent on the planet, who came to be a part of this enormous and wondrous art show.

Throughout the entire experience I watch their reactions and I listen to their conversations. I realize that these lovers of art are as critical to the Art Basel experience as any artist, gallery owner or individual work of art. Yes, the works were amazing, but the magic of this event comes from the people.

I head toward the exit of Art Basel Miami Beach both stoked and exhausted. As an artist, a writer and a human being, my boundaries have been stretched. I love it. I will return to Art Basel next year in the hopes of experiencing a whole different landscape of art and visitors. But right now I need to go create. ■

Until next time — stay inspired!

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Bob Kodzis is an award-winning artist, keynote speaker and performer. He has been contributing ideas and articles to Create Magazine for five years. Kodzis is also a facilitator and founder of the wildly creative thinktank Flight of Ideas, Inc. — a company whose mission it is to unleash a new level of fun and creativity throughout the world. His clients range from the United Way to Kennedy Space Center to Vekoma, the largest rollercoaster manufacturer in the world. You can contact Kodzis directly online at Bob@flightofideas.net, or check out his cool Web site at www.flightofideas.net.