

The Art Basel-Provincetown Connection

BY RAYMOND ELMAN

ARTISTS
ARTISTS
ARTISTS





ABOVE: ONE ENTRANCE TO ART BASEL, MIAMI BEACH, 2013 PHOTOS COURTESY OF ART BASEL
LEFT: GALERÍA ELVIRA GONZÁLEZ INSTALLATION WITH ADOLF GOTTLIEB PAINTING IN FOREGROUND, ART BASEL, 2013

ART BASEL WAS FOUNDED IN 1970 in Basel, Switzerland, by local gallerists. I first learned about Art Basel in 1975, when my print publisher, Hugh McKay of HMK Fine Arts, told me he was going to exhibit my prints at the Swiss event, in partnership with Editions Lahumiere. Hugh even asked me to make a poster for Art Basel. I still have a few. Today, the Art Basel franchise has become a global juggernaut, a gargantuan money machine, with venues in Basel, Miami Beach, and Hong Kong, where the best galleries in the world exhibit and sell works by great and less-great artists.

After winning a competition against other major US cities, Miami Beach launched Art Basel in 2002. Over the past twelve years, Art Basel has not only thrived and brought a wealthy global art-buying community to Miami Beach, it has also spawned over twenty satellite venues in the Miami area, attracting over one thousand galleries, exhibiting over six thousand artists.

From the beginning of Art Basel Miami Beach (<https://www.artbasel.com/en/miami-beach>), there has been a connection to the artists and gallerists of the Outer Cape art community. Given the caliber of the event, it should come as no surprise that major artists with international audiences, and Provincetown connections, are routinely exhibited at Art Basel, including Alex Katz, Robert Motherwell, Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, Andy Warhol, Joel Meyerowitz, Red Grooms, Adolph Gottlieb, Milton Avery, Arnold Newman, Larry Rivers, Wolf Kahn, and Ben Shahn.

Art Basel takes place in the Miami Beach Convention Center. They actually ship the specially designed hi-tech walls from Basel, Switzerland, to Miami Beach and back. The other twenty or so fairs, such as SCOPE, Art Miami, CONTEXT, and Miami Project, take place in gigantic tents that feel like museum spaces once entered. A few other fairs take place in hotels.

Those who have attended Art Basel Miami Beach (ABMB) and visited the satellite venues are well aware that the four-day event is overwhelming. To begin with, it's hard to find a hotel room or condo, if you don't book early. If you try to dine in the general area of the art venues, it's tough to get a table, if you don't book early. I had press passes and VIP passes to all the venues and openings, but for two of the openings I couldn't even get close enough to the venues to park my car because of traffic jams. And when you do manage to get into the venues, there is so much art to

see—good, great, and terrible—that the experience can be exhausting. Stir in the hot parties—like the Andy Warhol Museum party—and you get a delicious *parihuela* (my favorite Peruvian seafood stew).

Nevertheless, I love it.

I first became aware of Art Basel Miami Beach through **Ethan Cohen**, the founder and owner of Ethan Cohen Fine Arts (www.ecfa.com). I've known Ethan since he was a teenager who summered at his family home in Truro. It seemed almost inevitable that Ethan would develop an affinity for Asian art since both of his parents have strong connections to Asia—Ethan's father, Jerome A. Cohen, taught Chinese constitutional law at Harvard, where he was associate dean, as well as the founding director of the East Asia Legal Studies Association, and his mother, Joan Lebold Cohen, is a photographer, Asian art historian, and art critic who taught at the Boston Museum School of Art for twenty-five years. Ethan majored in East Asian Studies at Harvard,

and by the late 1980s opened a gallery called Art Waves/Ethan Cohen in Soho in New York, primarily representing Chinese dissident artists. In 1988, Ethan was the first person to exhibit Ai Weiwei's work in the United States.

In 2003, Ethan participated in the second Art Basel Miami Beach art week at the Scope Art Fair, which was hosted in the Townhouse Hotel. At the time there were only three art fairs in Miami: Art Basel, SCOPE, and NADA. Exhibiting in a hotel room was a great challenge for Ethan: "Curating in a difficult venue forced me to innovate and explore new ways to showcase art. That was an important moment of learning." Ethan has been a regular exhibitor at various ABMB week venues ever since. He is a great impresario, and in his second year of participation, he featured the performance artist Zhu Ming, who entered a clear, seven-foot, plastic bubble on South Beach while naked, rolled into the water, and continued to spin over the Atlantic Ocean.

In the first decade of the new millennium, there was a huge shift in the art market toward Asia, which, up to this point, had not been recognized by Art Basel Miami Beach or the other fairs. So in 2008, Ethan and three partners founded the ART ASIA fair, located near the Wynwood art district in a Miami area called Midtown. The ART ASIA fair showcased the best galleries and artists from all over Asia, including China, Japan, Thailand, Taiwan, Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, and Turkey. ART ASIA operated for five years. I asked Ethan why they closed the fair after 2012, and he replied, "My original goal was to bring a higher awareness of Asian art to Miami and the general American art market, so, as Asian art became more popular and the various other art fairs integrated more Asian artists and galleries, the need for a separate fair diminished. We accomplished our mission."

Indeed, the growing prominence of Asian art was clear when I spoke with gallerist **Gail Williams** of the Williams McCall Gallery (www.williams-mccallgallery.com), who recently returned from a workshop for gallery owners and collectors at Sotheby's in London. Gail showed me a Sotheby's pie chart of the global art auction market, which is dominated by Chinese collectors. The United States is a distant second. The UK is third. Gail and Dawn McCall own a home in Provincetown and represent several Outer Cape artists in their South Beach gallery, including John Dowd, Joan Cobb Marsh, Ernie Bynum, and yours truly. The opening exhibition at the Williams McCall Gallery was curated by Chris McCarthy, the esteemed director of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM), who travels to South Beach once each year to give a lecture at the gallery. For Art Basel week, Gail teamed with Provincetown gallerist **Gary Marotta** (www.garymarottafineart.com) to exhibit Manuel Pardo, a Cuban-American artist who recently passed away.

Marla Rice is another Provincetown gallerist who has participated in Art Basel week since 2006. She exhibits work from the Rice Polak Gallery (www.ricepolak.com).



PHOTO BY STEPHAN GOETTLICHER



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ETHAN COHEN, MICHELLE WEINBERG IN HER STUDIO, MIKE CARROLL, RAYMOND ELMAN AND JOHN DOWD, INSTALLATION OF RICE-POLAK GALLERY, AQUA ART MIAM, I JOHN DOWD'S SHOW AT WILLIAMS MCCALL GALLERY, INSTALLATION OF RICHARD BAKER AT ARTHUR ROGER'S GALLERY, ART MIAMI

ricepolakgallery.com), including pieces by Vico Fabris, Ellen LeBow, and Patrick Webb, at the Aqua Art Miami fair, which takes place in the Aqua Hotel on Collins Avenue in the heart of South Beach. There are a few fairs that utilize hotels, and the gallerists have to be creative about how they display art in hotel rooms. Aqua attracts a lot of serious art collectors, and Marla told me that 2013 was her best sales year ever at the art fair.

When I asked Marla about the benefits she derives from participating in Aqua, she told me that besides selling art, and hopefully making a profit, she is also able to cultivate new patrons who will visit her gallery in Provincetown and see her annually in Miami at the fair. In addition, Marla finds new artists for her gallery at the events. Since most of the artists that Rice Polak Gallery represents are not artists with Outer Cape connections, Marla is able to freely review the work of hundreds of artists in one week in Miami and see if she can find new artists who are appropriate for her gallery.

An Outer Cape artist who has found great success in Miami is **Richard Baker**, who, along with John Waters, was represented at Art Basel by the Arthur Roger Gallery from New Orleans (not Orleans). Although he has never attended Art Basel week in Miami—the timing is bad for him—Richard told me that during the first two years he was represented by the Arthur Roger Gallery, “the results were over the top.” They sold almost every piece that Richard gave them.

Mike Carroll of the Schoolhouse Gallery (www.gallerieschoolhouse.com) first attended Art Basel Miami in 2003. He first leased an exhibition space in 2007 in the ART NOW venue, which no longer exists. The years 2007 and 2008 were a tipping-point period when the number of fairs grew considerably—the venue locations expanded from Miami Beach to Midtown Miami, and it was no longer possible to visit all of the galleries during the allotted time. This expansion also caused Mike to pull back from renting a space for Schoolhouse Gallery, and partner with other gallerists instead to present a select group of artists in the fair called “Ink,” which specializes in works on paper.

Like Marla Rice, Mike Carroll finds artists during Miami Art Week and adds them to his group—for example, Yolanda Sánchez, a Cuban-American artist from Miami Beach. Mike differentiates the experience of selling art in Provincetown from the experience of selling art at the Miami Fair by pointing out that in Provincetown, art is a shared community value, and artists and gallerists support and celebrate one another. Mike becomes friends with his Provincetown clients and artists, and the experience is very personal. When people attend the Miami Art Fairs, they are viewing the work at face value, absent of backstories and regionalized support. It’s invigorating to Mike, because he has the opportunity to explain the value of less-familiar work.

Michelle Weinberg (www.michelleweinberg.com) is a former Fine Arts Work Center Fellow (1993–1994), represented by the Schoolhouse Gallery. She moved from Provincetown to Miami Beach in 1999, on a fellowship from the National Association for the Advancement of the Arts, and has yet to leave South Florida. One reason that Michelle stays in South Florida is that “Miami is a much smaller pool than New York, so I get all kinds of calls for writing assignments, public and private commissions, teaching, etc. Nevertheless, the art community has grown so much since I’ve been here, and, of course, it’s the center of the art world for that one week of the year when Art Basel is here.” Michelle is not a big fan of art fairs: “They are interesting manifestations of a really hyper marketplace, but I don’t think they are an optimum way to appreciate art.” However, she recognizes that Art Basel has increased the awareness and appreciation of art in Miami, brought collectors to Miami from around the world, and kick-started a diverse art community that is increasingly sophisticated.



AI WEIWEI DOING FACETIME WITH ETHAN COHEN

Ai Weiwei at Perez Art Museum Miami

I INTERVIEWED ETHAN COHEN for this article over breakfast in a condominium overlooking Miami’s Biscayne Bay. In the middle of our interview, Ethan’s mobile phone rang. It was Ai Weiwei calling from China to confirm a meeting with the President of the Maryland Institute College of Art, who had brought a cap and gown to China to bestow an honorary degree on Weiwei, and a videographer to record the ceremony. Ethan, of course, had conceived the event and helped make it happen.

During Art Basel week, Ai Weiwei was the featured artist at the brand-new Pérez Art Museum Miami (the other PAMM). On opening night, Ethan gave our little group—my wife, Lee, past president of the Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill; Kim Kettler, the current president of Castle Hill; Rick Grossman, a WHAT board member; and artists Murray and Martha Zimiles—an extraordinary guided tour of the Weiwei exhibit. Ethan knew the whole backstory on every piece in the exhibition. Included in the exhibit were photos from Ethan’s first New York gallery, one of which was snapped when Ethan’s mother, Joan Lebold Cohen, interviewed Weiwei for her 1988 *ARTnews* review, “Two Steps Forward, One Step Back.”

At Art Basel Miami Beach 2013, a controversy surrounding Ai Weiwei’s work exposed some of the unrest in the Miami art community, especially pertaining to the event itself. Maximo Caminero, a fifty-one-year-old artist, walked into the Weiwei retrospective at PAMM, picked up one of the *Colored Vases* on display, and dropped it, destroying the piece. On the wall behind

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the vases, a large triptych of photographs depicted Weiwei dropping an ancient urn in the same manner as Caminero. Caminero claimed he was protesting the new museum on behalf of local artists, and that Weiwei's triptych, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, had inspired him. "I did it for all the local artists in Miami that have never been shown in museums here," he explained to the *Miami New Times*. "They have spent so many millions now on international artists."

Ethan Cohen remarked, "The big difference between Caminero's action and the purposeful destruction of artworks by Weiwei and Rauschenberg is that Weiwei owned the urns he smashed and was making a comment on Mao's enjoiner that in order to move forward there had to be a break with the past; and Rauschenberg asked de Kooning for permission to erase his drawing. Caminero destroyed work of another artist. If he was more creative, he might have found another way to protest."

While Caminero's protest connects the dots with Ai Weiwei's original urn-smashing performance, as well as with other legends of destruction, such as Robert Rauschenberg erasing a Willem de Kooning drawing, it also highlights a telling discrepancy in how Miami artists perceive the spotlight of Art Basel. Unlike Provincetown artists, who are nurtured by over a century of artistic tradition and support, the Miami art scene is relatively young, and artists are still seeking ways to unite a geographically dispersed group of diverse art communities that are overwhelmed by Art Basel's annual spectacle.

I attended the opening press conference for Art Basel Miami Beach 2013, where the first speaker was Norman Braman, the billionaire art collector and auto dealer who was instrumental in bringing Art Basel to Miami Beach. Braman and subsequent speakers spoke of the great economic impact that Art Basel has on Miami, and the millions and millions of dollars spent on art. And everybody praised Marc Spiegler, the director of all three Art Basel shows, as the star of the event. I thought, "Is anybody going to talk about the quality of the art instead of the quantity of money?" Finally, Marc Spiegler moved to the podium and said, "Before I read my prepared remarks, I just want to say that I am not the star of Art Basel. The artists are the stars of Art Basel." ❏

RAY ELMAN started the Outer Cape Repertory Film Society in 1971, ran the To Be Coffeehouse from 1972 to 1973, and served for many years on the board of directors of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, the Provincetown Group Gallery, and the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater. He and Chris Busa cofounded Provincetown Arts in 1985. (Ray left the magazine in 1990, and in 1991 the magazine became a publication of the nonprofit Provincetown Arts Press.) Ray's paintings and prints have been widely exhibited and are included in numerous collections. His paintings of Jhumpa Lahiri, Robert Pinsky, Stanley Kunitz, and Alan Dugan are in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Ray is currently serving as the Chairman of the Board of Provincetown Arts. (See www.rayelman.com for more information.)



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