

HOME PAGE

Is the cancellation of Art Basel a ‘blessing in disguise’ for Miami’s local art scene?

Every year for a few days in December, Art Basel transforms Miami into the center of the art world. The fair’s cancellation this year has pulled the plug on a yearly promise of crowds, creativity and a major economic boost for the city.

“We not only lose what we call the Super Bowl of the art world, but you’re also losing 25 to 30 satellite art fairs that are scattered around Miami-Dade,” said George Neary, former associate vice president of cultural tourism for the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau. “So you have all these fairs – some of them on the actual sand, some throughout Wynwood – and all these other events happening simultaneously which won’t be coming either. So that’s another blow to the community because it was an additional draw.”

Art Basel had been scheduled to take place this year Dec. 3-6 at the Miami Beach Convention Center. The event brings in approximately \$16 million dollars in direct spending each year, according to the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau. Money pours in from a combination of resort and revenue taxes, hotels, dining and special events.

But there’s more than just December’s cashflow in the balance. Art Basel and the myriad satellite fairs clustered around it have drawn untold thousands of visitors and locals not just to Miami Beach, but to neighborhoods like Wynwood, the Design District and downtown Miami – accelerating their redevelopment, and also raising their profile as cultural destinations.

And while the Design District this year will host a scaled-back version of the [Design Miami fair](#), a corporate cousin to the main Art Basel show, those thousands of curious globetrotters – and their money and energy — will be largely absent this December.

That means a loss of revenue for museums and galleries, already suffering from 10 months of depressed sales thanks to COVID-19, that have come to rely on Miami Art Week for attendance peaks, splashy and profitable event rentals, and a bump in sales.

And it means a loss of the leverage that Miami’s museums and private collections in particular have enjoyed during the week to jack up their global reps and cultivate relationships with curators and collectors that could lead to gifts of art, funding or support for future loans of art or exhibitions.

“Galleries and individual artists really prosper and get opportunities during art week,” said Laura Bruney, CEO of the Arts & Business Council of Miami. “They can meet and sell to collectors from all over the world. For the museums, they have deep-pocketed collectors come and a lot of big companies bring events.

“It’s an opportunity to showcase Miami as one of the top art markets in the world. There is tons of visibility during that week. It’s amazing and priceless for us. That’s going to be missing this year, obviously.”

Every Thursday during Art Basel Miami Beach's long run, the Perez Art Museum and its predecessor on Flagler Street have hosted thousands of visitors and VIPs for an art-week extravaganza featuring high-profile exhibition openings, bands and DJs and, one memorable year, performers with water-jet boots doing acrobatics over the bay to a techno beat.

For several years, PAMM has enjoyed Art Week synergies with Art Miami, December's second-marquee fair, which several years ago moved its tent from Midtown to the Miami Herald's former site just a few steps away. For Miami Art Week, PAMM director Franklin Sirmans notes, half the museum's heightened attendance has been from out of town.

PAMM is still expecting a bump, and will be open six days that week this year, compared to its pandemic reopening schedule of Thursday to Friday, Sirmans said – though capacity will still be limited to about 20% of normal capacity through timed ticket sales. The museum has gone ahead with what it hoped would be a big Art Week attraction, a show focused on art from [Africa and the African diaspora](#).

FLAGLER STREET

PAMM also is partnering with the Downtown Development Authority and entrepreneur Moishe Mana's Mana Contemporary to select artists for installations and performances in the numerous vacant storefronts along historic Flagler Street, which has also been hit hard by the pandemic.

DDA executive director Cristina Crespi said it's an effort to draw more Miamians to the street, where Mana and others have in past years sponsored pop-up exhibits and events during Art Week. The goal is not just to replace a bit of the energy and revenue for restaurants and bars, but also to turn the spotlight to local artists and look to the future.

A long-delayed street rebuild is starting in January, and the agency and property owners like Mana say the arts will be central to its prospects of success.

"Everybody's been struggling. It's been difficult for everyone," Crespi said of the pandemic. "When Art Basel canceled, I saw it as an opportunity to showcase the local art community. The time is now to activate in a safe way and provide an opportunity to do things a little differently. And who knows what may come from this?"

But Sirmans acknowledges it won't be nearly the same without the big events in town.

"We are planning this year very differently," he said. "There are so many activities that happen at that time normally. That week gave us a very high profile around the world. This year will not have the same degree of impact."

It's also somewhat uncertain whether PAMM will be in a position to bounce fully back to the same level as before when Art Basel does return, presumably next December, Sirmans said. The museum has doubled its collection in recent years and hopes to mount a show drawn from it for Art Week next year.

But the financial picture remains clouded with the third pandemic surge underway and its long-term impact on PAMM still unclear.

“We have to see how the year begins to unfold. Museums are closing in D.C. after this weekend. I’m always hopeful we won’t have to feel the impact of another surge,” Sirmans said. “But I’m also clear-eyed that the ongoing challenge will be for quite some time.”

Miami-Dade county’s cultural czar, Michael Spring, is optimistic that by December of 2021, people here and abroad will be more than ready and eager to jump back into the hoopla of Miami Art Week.

And its absence this year, if anything, is proof of how vital arts and culture have become to Miami’s economic and urban vitality.

“There is a pause button that we’re hitting on things this year,” Spring said. “I think it was a good decision. At a cosmic level, it’s incredibly regrettable this is happening. The impact is enormous. But this is the right thing to do.

“And it demonstrates how the arts can really push the economy in a positive way. I do think we’ll come roaring back in 2021. People will be even more wildly enthusiastic about coming back to life, and having Art Basel come back.

“I don’t think it will have a lasting impact on our arts institutions, which have had years of Art Basel to establish their reputation for excellent work.”

SILVER LINING?

At the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami in the Design District, the usual “bevy” of Art Week artist talks, performances and concerts is off this year for safety reasons, artistic director Alex Gartenfeld said.

But he said there may be a bit of a silver lining for the ICA and Miami’s art scene from the pandemic. The temporary move of Design Miami back to the district, and plans for several temporary galleries to open for an extended duration in December are likely to attract a healthy number of visitors, Gartenfeld said.

“The Design District is looking to capture some of the momentum in a safe way and carry the torch for art and culture for 2020,” Gartenfeld said.

And those visiting are likely to be not only locals, but also New Yorkers. As the virus surges again there, many will be spending more time in Miami, where it’s possible to be outdoors and thus less at risk, he said.

“I have found that there continues to be great and energized buzz around Miami. Many of my friends and colleagues are choosing to come here, and the cultural organizations here will benefit,” Gartenfeld said.

The continued buzz is a product of the city having collectively thought ahead, said Neil Hall, founder of Art Africa Miami in Overtown.

“Basel was important to put us on the map as an art center, but Miami recognized the idea that if Basel should go somewhere else we needed to have a brand of our own and that brand is Miami Art Week. Miami Art Week is still going on,” Hall said. “I look forward to Art Basel next year and I think we should reimagine what it should be as it pertains to community.”

At the year-old Rubell Museum in Allapattah, Mera Rubell is still expecting a crowd of locals and out-of-towners alike for December. But even if it won't be the mob that greeted last year's inauguration of the family collections new home, she's ready with five new exhibitions — including a jaw-dropping Yayoi Kusama work, “Narcissus Garden” from 1966, consisting of an arrangement of 700 mirrored stainless steel spheres that fill the museum's central gallery.

“We love to surprise and delight. Even if Art Basel is not here in the flesh, its presence is felt. We are engaged as though Basel is here,” Rubell said.

The cancellation of Art Basel, meanwhile, has not crippled the business side too badly, she said. The museum's acclaimed Basque restaurant, Leku, is booked solid for weeks, Rubell said. And she expects that the Rubell-owned Albion Hotel on South Beach will be nearly sold out during Art Week.

“The rates are not what they were, but the people are coming,” Rubell said. “I think people want to come and walk on the beach safely and peacefully.”

BUSINESSES, WORKERS

For Bianca and Andrea Romero, co-owners of the Miami-based event planning company Romelli, Art Basel is their most high end event of the year. The husband and wife duo have been directors of hospitality for Art Basel for the past three years.

With business at a standstill since February, the Romeros saw this cancellation coming, too.

Their company hires up to 300 employees for the main fair inside the convention center. The positions include ticket takers, greeters and brand ambassadors. They also provide bartenders and caterers. Jobs start at \$15 per hour depending on qualifications and the position. Hiring typically begins in the summer, when they recruit at language and hospitality schools.

“With the first fairs canceled and the convention center being used as a temporary hospital, we knew there was no way they were going to have a show,” said Andrea.

While they couldn't say how much money their company will lose, they estimated it was in the tens of thousands.

“We're event planners, so we plan ahead,” he added. “But most of our employees are unemployed because many of them are freelancers.”

He estimates that about half of the people who work Art Basel return year after year. Many are students and retirees.

Tour companies will also take a hit due to the cancellations, said Neary. He conducted about 10 tours during Art Week last year with his own company, Tours-R-Us. But he hasn't done a tour since March.

The silver lining, said Neary, is that the cancellation has propelled various spaces to make use of new spaces in creative ways.

In Miami Beach, a temporary installation in Collins Park will turn the space into a healing garden using native plants that visitors will be able to take home once the exhibition is over. On Lincoln Road, the theater company Miami New Drama will transform seven empty storefronts into the seven deadly sins. Visitors will be able to watch the short themed plays in socially distanced groups of 10.

"The overall message is we're still celebrating art and culture but in a very safe and socially distanced way," said Brandi Reddick, cultural affairs manager for the City of Miami Beach. "We live in Miami Beach. we're having this at the most beautiful time in our calendar year – it's still a celebration of art and we can do it in a safe way. It's been a difficult year for all of us and we're envisioning how to implement art and culture in a new way."

REAL ESTATE IMPACT

Since Art Basel's first years, developers have used the art fairs as an opportunity to showcase new projects, especially to out-of-town buyers. But over the years, familiarity with Miami and its heightened reputation as an cultural center pushed Miami front-and-center among wealthy globetrotters seeking warm-weather outposts — a trend that is playing out amid the pandemic, and [increasing numbers of urban dwellers](#) from New York, Chicago and California move this way, sometimes bringing their companies with them.

A handful of developers are still hosting events this season, including Raimundo Onetto, principal and CEO of Alta Developers, who wants to capitalize on already-strong sales at Quadro Residences in Miami Beach. "Art Basel is the single event in the year that brings the most people to Miami," Onetto said. "And it brings a lot of wealthy people."

Said Minette Schwartz, a Realtor with the Miami Beach-focused Schwartz team at Compass. "A big part of what is being lost is that networking that happens during that time."

Developers and individuals selling existing condos see the greatest benefit, said Peggy Olin, president and CEO of OneWorld Properties, since visitors can tour the units. This year, that would have included condos at Miami Worldcenter, including Paramount Miami Worldcenter. Legacy, a second condo and hotel at Worldcenter, is currently under construction.

Any boost would be welcome. In December 2019, OneWorld closed on 30 units across the properties it represents; this year, Olin will consider it a win if she closes on 20. "Things are slow. It's not only Art Basel not coming. It's the total impact of people not coming into the city and doing tours."

Other Realtors are capitalizing on a fall rush that has brought a wave of out-of-town buyers initially looking for single-family homes, and now looking at condos. At Aston Martin Residences at the mouth of the Miami River, sales are expected to exceed last December, said sales director Paulie Hankin. Shuffield, of EWM Berkshire Hathaway, and Fortune International Group President Edgardo Defortuna are seeing the same.

Even when Art Basel is held in-person, real estate often mirrors the fairs. As with the highest-priced artworks themselves, sales aren't necessarily consummated on the spot.

"Art Basel is a great week because all of the eyes of the world are on Miami," said Defortuna.

UBER, JETS TAKE A HIT

Javi Correoso, public affairs manager for Uber in Florida, said Miami Art Week is probably the busiest and most important for the company in its South Florida market — more so than even New Year's Eve.

"Art Basel kicks off a series of almost weekly events in South Florida that run through April that historically generated a ton of demand," Correoso said. "Whether those events take place or not is definitely going to have an impact that Uber sees...during a period that we historically see as the busy season."

Uber has been able to cushion its 2020 ride-share losses — down 50% in its most recent quarter — through gains in its delivery business, which improved 135%. In South Florida, more than 25,000 drivers have made a first-time food delivery since March 15. A large number of these are drivers who have typically driven for rideshares have added or transitioned to food and grocery delivery in the last eight months, Uber said.

Private jetting — typically an Art Week winner — is already seeing a boost. Ultra-high-net-worth individuals opting for private over the the health risks of commercial transportation this year have pushed the biggest industry players to or over pre-COVID flight levels, according to Doug Gollan, founder and editor-in-chief of industry site privatejetcardcomparisons.com.

Wheels Up was better positioned than many to handle a crisis like the pandemic, having gone into 2020 riding a series of major acquisitions and partnerships that by one measure made it the second-largest for-hire fleet behind NetJets.

Wheels Up co-founder Justin Firestone, who also leads the company's Florida market, said that for wealthier Americans, said the pandemic has shifted private aviation from a luxury to a necessity.

"When you have folks with disposable income weighing the pros and cons of an item they see value in, we've bumped ahead of joining a golf club or buying a sports car," he said.

Added Wheels Up CEO Kenny Dichter: "We're seeing a reprioritization of where private flight, private airplanes, and membership fits into the mix."

Still, Gollan notes, Art Basel's cancellation will leave a mark on the local economy.

"Without doubt, not having [those wealthy individuals] come into Miami is going to be a big blow," he said in an email. "These are the folks who stay in the suites that cost \$5,000 per night. They rent the exotic cars and

book limos and drivers. They order the \$1,000 bottles of wine at dinner...It takes a lot of folks who drink Budweiser to replace a bottle of Chateau Lafitte Rothschild.”

Some may also be lured by Miami Shines, the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau’s \$7 million national pandemic marketing campaign. The visitor’s bureau’s Arts, Culture and Heritage months of December and January by offering special promotions on Miami-area sights and outings.

“In lieu of Art Basel not being here, as well most other fairs during that week, we’re really focusing on the message that there’s still an art and culture scene in Miami that for two months you can enjoy,” said GMCVB senior director of communications Suzie Spender.

FEWER EYES, MORE FOCUS

For the arts community, the absence of the fairs may bring some benefits. For one thing, it has given local galleries more incentive to collaborate and discover new ways of presenting art, said Ibett Yanez del Castillo, executive director of Emerson Dorsch gallery.

“It’s nice to be able to pull back and focus on what we’re doing,” Yanez del Castillo said.

Scheduled visits implemented to adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols have allowed gallerists more time to interact with clients one-on-one, she added.

“Basel has been a great force and a great motivator in bringing global awareness to Miami and our institutions and collections have grown a great deal and so have the galleries,” she said. “I think we still have that collective force to put on something wonderful for December.”

The cancellation also provides a welcome break for gallerists, said Jumaane N’Namdi, director of N’Namdi Contemporary Miami in Little Haiti, which offers work by Black artists.

“I think it’s going to be a time to have Miami enjoy an art week that will be smaller, but also safer for this time,” he said. “A lot of times we don’t really get to appreciate art week because we’re just running around and working, so we’re never a guest anyway.”

N’Namdi is used to hosting hundreds of people at the gallery that week.

“The way somebody who’s coming from France sees the fairs is different from the way I see it because I’m prepping and planning events,” he said. “Now that it’s smaller, galleries are going to get more local attention.”

But there’s no denying the Art Basel void.

“It’s our busiest time of the year. Period,” said Lorie Mertes, executive director of Locust Projects in the Design District. “We get a ton of visitors. The numbers can go up to the thousands. Those kinds of eyes and international visitors are not something we can pull any other time of the year.”

The nonprofit exhibition space and gallery has had up to 5,000 visitors in a week during the festivities. “For us 5,000 in two months would be a lot,” Mertes said.

Last year during Art Basel Locust welcomed its most visitors ever. A barbecue for artist Trenton Doyle Hancock brought a crowd complete with a tent and red-checkered tablecloths to the parking lot. As a nonprofit rather than a commercial art gallery, Locust relies on the fanfare around Art Basel to pull in significant amounts of press and funds, Mertes said. A benefit dinner that raises a minimum of \$50,000 ahead of the fair was canceled this year.

“The other thing that’s less obvious is that Art Basel brings what’s happening now in the art world and many artists don’t have the budget to travel and catch up on the current trends or network, so Miami artists are really fortunate to have the art world come to them,” Mertes added. “Having this come to our door is such a tremendous professional development opportunity.”

RESET FOR ARTISTS?

The loss is being felt by artists as well, said Miami artist Carlos Betancourt. Since the pandemic began, Betancourt’s given out between 30 and 40 grants to artists from Miami and Puerto Rico through the Betancourt-Latorre Foundation for its COVID-19 [Visual Artist Relief Fund](#).

Still, artists are accustomed to challenges, he said.

“The main role of an artist is to create art,” Betancourt said. “That hasn’t changed. With Basel or without Basel – there was no Art Basel here before and artists were creating. What Art Basel creates is a platform to promote your work, but when those things are gone, your team or your gallery has to look at other ways.”

The event’s cancellation is an opportunity for artists to challenge the mainstream art world, said Betancourt.

Hall, from Art Africa, thinks moving the attention away from the beach fairs will allow the city to flex its muscles and feature more local work in communities across the causeway. This year Art Africa is reinventing its fair with a series of online presentations on various topics including sustainable community building and gentrification in Overtown.

“The problem I have sometimes with art galleries is it still goes back to this elitist model where people who are not familiar with that space feel intimidated by the space,” he said. “We need everybody to have that space. It doesn’t have to be exclusive.”

Marlon Pruz, a Miami muralist and illustrator, agrees. For Pruz, 27, the fair was a way to network. Last year he sat outside the Convention Center with a few of his pieces. But Art Basel also feels like an insular event that’s not always welcoming to local artists who may not have connections to the main fairs, he added.

“The local scene is clouded by the art fairs coming from all over the world and while they bring in business and people, they keep it to their bubble,” Pruz said.

Two years ago he made that point in an impromptu performance inside the Convention Center.

He took a marker out of his pocket and asked his mom to put on the reflective jacket he was wearing. Then, as his sister filmed, he started to doodle on the jacket. It didn’t take long before spectators crowded around him.

“It was sort of a little protest,” Pruz said. “You put up these structures to define what art is and you get to choose what you show and it’s not even based on how good it is; a lot of it is politics and gallery relationships. Since I was doing that in that space I all of a sudden became one of the artists in the Convention Center. The tour guides were talking about it like I was one of the internationally renowned artists and people were crowding around me like it was incredible when it’s really just the context of the space. If I was in the mall, people would just walk by.”

He thinks Art Basel’s cancellation is a blessing in disguise – a reset button that will allow the spotlight to shine on Miami’s local art scene instead of being clouded by the international fair.

“People haven’t forgotten about Art Basel,” Pruz said. “People are going to be out in the street as much as they were, but it’s a bit like going back to the Wild West and going back to the beginning. Hopefully that will translate over to next year when things start opening back up and people will realize who really makes the Miami art scene.”