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VOL. 2 #3/4



Doin' Miami

D. Dominick Lombardi: Notes From a Fair Participant



On a bright, windless and chilly December first, I left my humble abode in New York and headed down south Miami way. The weeks, days and hours prior to leaving were filled with anticipation, wondering how I would fare as a first time participant in Aqua Art Miami located in the Aqua Hotel on Collins Avenue just a few blocks south of "the big one," Art Basel Miami.

Now I've done the fair scene as an artist in the past, in the late 1980s and early 90s in Chicago and Cologne to be exact, when I wasn't sure if I should tell anyone. You see, in those days, the fairs were looked down upon by the art world. The general thinking then was the fairs were too commercial, unpure even. Today, many believe the fairs outweigh the biennials, with their obvious effect on all the various aspects of the art world. But who knows.

So I get to Miami Airport, only to be greeted by a somewhat stupefying shuttle system and hot, noisy, exhaust fume-filled passenger pick-up stands. I finally get to my hotel, the Essex House, which was clean and reasonable. I quickly get unpacked and ready to get on with it. Collins Avenue is pretty much the same up and down. On the east side, you have your various levels

of hotels. Across the street, for the most part, are restaurants and hotels with street accessible eateries.

On my way to Aqua, which was five blocks north of the hotel, I run into my good buddy Michael who was dining at a street side restaurant with his associate Anthony. They were having lunch, and offered me a cocktail. "Why not," I replied.

In due time, we left for Aqua. Now, maybe it's just me, but I found Aqua Art Miami to be the coolest fair that I saw there. The building itself had this retro feel—that hotel/motel two-story look with all its rooms leading out to an open courtyard featuring a fountain-fed pool and various indigenous flora. Nothing too fancy mind you, just the right amount of kitsch.

Slowly we worked our way through the first floor's galleries, many of which were from Seattle, where a smart group of galleries organized this particular first time fair. These were galleries like Platform, who featured these really cool and, dare I say, stunning, oversized heads comprised of painted archival corrugated cardboard by Scott Fife.

After about 45 minutes or so of poking around and schmoozing, we get to my esteemed dealer, Lisa Boyle of Chicago. She was already doing well, and even sold one of my works. Cool. Overall, her show was edgy without being pretentious. OK. So now, with my one sale and a mojito under my belt, and seeing the really cool set-up Lisa had, I am feeling pretty good.

A little while later, after combing through most of the other second floor gallery rooms, I remembered to call Betty, who I was anxious to meet up with. We spoke briefly, setting up a time and place—the Shore Club—where we would meet this food critic for dinner at Nobu.

I get there at rendezvous time to meet Betty who was accompanied by a collector from out of state. They both had lots of interesting insights on what was going on there, which I found quite refreshing. Without boring you with the details, dinner was fabulous. It's Nobu for christ's sakes.

Then, with the help of a \$20 cab ride, it was off to the Design District for more art ogling. There, we perused through this five-story, airy, open-floor layout of a building where funky furniture mixed with classic modernist design. A real standout was the monochromatic and oddly organic furniture of Forrest Meyers, whose chairs, tables and objects seemed to be everywhere. After a few more stops, including the show at Deitch, we were headed for home.

The next morning, I met Betty and the collector for brunch, where we planned out our day. A simple plan: Scope at the Townhouse Hotel over on 20th Street, then a quick bite to eat, then



back to Aqua to see how we were doing at Lisa's gallery. Scope, as expected, was energizing and fun. There were tons of art work I loved, such as Galerie Adler's featured artists, the 25-ish Sebastian Gögel who specializes in outrageous narratives featuring twisting, nightmarish forms made beautiful with magical, radiant colors.

Angell Gallery's featured artist was Kim Dorland, who paints these weirdly colorful distilled images of teens being teens. (I'm sure it was those piercing orange/red grounds that activated the colors.) Paule Hammer's paintings over in Galerie Andreas Binder can be described as "Design Gone Wild." For me, they had instant appeal, by both assaulting and heightening my senses, while Michael Miller's murky menageries over at Curcioprojects muddled the collective understanding of painting a picture.

Jack the Pelican Presents featured Russell Nachman's Bosch-like landscapes, and Pablo's Birthday, with the work by digital artist Carla Gannis, contemporized further the darker comedic approach to the nightmare mindset. I was also amazed by the precision and depth of the art in Ricco/Maresca Gallery, with Tricia Cline's stunning and hauntingly beautiful sculptures, and Toc Fetch's magnetic, mesmerizing and magically real drawings. Over in Byron C. Cohen Gallery for Contemporary Art, I found the acrylic and graphite drawings by featured artist Laura Sharp Wilson to be meditative and fine.

After a few hours of looking, and bumping into tons of friends from back in New York, Richmond and Florida, we three headed out for a brief respite at a local, quiet, but a bit too dark, Cuban diner. There, I bumped into two artist friends from Brooklyn, Judith and Charles. It was at this point that I realized that it was true, a substantive percentage of the art world was coming through Miami—and the energy was palpable.

Soon, we were back on our feet, headed for Aqua to check in on Lisa Boyle. The collector, who had begun to know my work some through our conversations, selected two drawings of mine for her home. Very, very cool. Another hour or so went by as we looked around. Then, after cooling our heels on the second floor deck where we sipped our wines and waters while watching passersby try to take it all in, we returned to our hotels for a quick change. It can get pretty cool at night in Miami's December.

Later that evening, I hit Scope again, where a rooftop party was scheduled for 9 pm. Before going in, I met Steve who was with a bunch of his new friends from Atlanta, Christine from Germany, and some old buds from Toronto. I got my neck temporarily tattooed with the words "Billy Bob" in some oldish looking font by Jillian McDonald, had a few quick drinks, then headed on up

to the rooftop which had an interesting night view of the surrounding area. Now here's where it gets a bit awkward. You see so many people you know at these after-hour deals, you don't know what to do.

By now, too, I am hungry, tired, and there is still another party we should visit over at the Delano where \$14 drinks and \$300 semi-private pool side beds were offered. Now, that's a bit much for an artist's budget, so after an hour or so there, Steve and I were out and back to that Cuban diner for a Cuban sandwich that was a bit too mass-produced looking. We ran into Robert, another friend from New York. We talked a bit about it all, with half-baked sentences and loosely connected thoughts perched atop lumpy counterside stools under sticky incandescent bulbs. By the next morning, Saturday, I was ready for "the big fair." Art Basel Miami is located in the Miami Beach Conference Center, where a few other things went on including Art Nova. So, to begin the day, I met Steve for brunch at La Galleria (I had a 20 percent off VIP card), then headed over to Basel for some heavy art overload. Having never been, Steve showed me the ropes: where and how to get my press pass, and the must-see view from the upper hallways overlooking the vast sea of art and onlookers.

Once immersed in the seemingly endless booths filled with art, which in many instances, were quite wonderful, I could not help but feel a bit overwhelmed. Actually, to be truthful, I was very overwhelmed. However, what I did find was comfort in being next to the works of some of the greatest artists of the 20th Century.

I could only describe it as a cleansing process, seeing the hauntingly familiar works by Tom Wesselmann at Maxwell Davidson Gallery, the serene and tasteful Giorgio Morandi paintings at Galleria Tega, and the substantive and ominous Christo wrap dealie at Annely Juda Fine Art.

Then there was Stuart Davis's last (unfinished) painting *Fin* (1962-64) over at Salander-O'Reilly, with its masking tape still applied—which left us hovering in thought. But the most incredible, eye-popping work was over at Peter Freeman, Inc. It was *Skelett* (1974) by Sigmar Polke.

Skelett has that perfect blend of the hideous and beautiful—that mixture of technique and temperament that artists rarely achieve.

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Page 28: D. Dominick Lombardi, *Beachcomber*, 2005. Charcoal on museum board, 16 X 12 in. Images courtesy of Lisa Boyle Gallery. / Page 29, left-right: Scott Fife, *Popeye*, 2004. Archival cardboard, glue and screws; 22" x 18" x 18". Courtesy of Platform Gallery. / Tricia Tree Cline, *Holybean, The Sadhu King*, 2005. Porcelain, 24" x 15" x 12". Courtesy of Ricco/Maresca Gallery. / Scott Fife, *Bob Dylan*, 2003. Archival cardboard, glue and screws; 22" x 16" x 16".