

MIAMI

MIAMI'S NEW VICE

The rise and rise of America's newest capital of culture

It's bikini hot. A cobalt sky reaches all the way to the horizon. Beautiful people sprawl across the white sands of South Beach and Michael Mann's 80's vision of an America styled specifically for the glamorous nuances of prime-time drama appears to remain intact. This much we already know but what's been emerging steadily, and far more on an inside track, over the last decade is a whole new additional scene, based around the arrival of truckloads of Art.

Art, Artists, designers and all the fervour and creativity which comes with them has been enveloping the city with science fiction like stealth since the slow demise of the late '80's/early '90's, success/excess 'Cocaine Cowboys' era and is carrying it beyond it's cinematic resonances into a futuristic, cultural utopia.

The biggest single event to make impact, and which in truth hit like a meteor was, of course, Art Basel Miami when it arrived in 2002. The biggest Art show on Earth, transferred from its Swiss roots to the heat of Florida and a brand new spotlight of global attention onto the resort city. Lorenzo Rudolf, Founder of Art Basel, understood the exceptional geographical positioning of the city (Miami sits on a perfect juncture between the Americas, Europe and the Caribbean) and a new scene was born.

Miami born property developer and Arts enthusiast, Craig Robins was a key figure in bringing 'Art Basel Miami Beach' to Miami "as a direct reciprocation of Art Basel" and also founded Design Miami - a showcase inspired by the galvanising effect that he saw the Art forum had had on the city, as the ripples of experience spread feverishly outward. Robins, who studied History of Art in Barcelona, followed by Law back in the US and came to prominence developing the district of South Beach that had to fallen into disrepair, wields the shows as a kind of creative laboratory in which all kinds of cultural and creative bents fuse. A man who likes the blurred distinctions between the collectibles of design and those of Art (essentially anything of a limited edition is his thing) his aim is to elevate the prospects on all media and talent involved. On a simple level it's to continue to populate the world with things of beauty, to crank up the inspiration and watch what happens. Robin's talks with transparently patriotic enthusiasm for the city he grew up and clearly wants to give back to, ideally right back into the lap of the city's multi-cultural community.

It's a modern truism that where there's Art there's money but Miami's new creative movements have a grass-roots sincerity to them that's so infectious that propagation is a given.

Jewellery designer Luis Morais came from to Miami from Brazil twelve years ago, ditching a solid career with a major textiles company three years later to set-up his own business as a jewellery designer from the kitchen of his apartment - a direct result of both the inspiration on the city's streets and the positivity and support he found in the general community. Morais, who has recently collaborated with both designer



Tony Melillo and fashion brand Joseph, and whose designs mix rock iconography with the scent of luxury via pearls and diamonds, spends a chunk of the year in New York for business but maintains that his heart and home now belong to the sunshine city.

Describing the language of the place as "chic and cheesy living shoulder to shoulder" it's the frisson that provides the thrill (in Miami, he says "you have to make things which are bolder, more daring) and the fact that high end isn't segregated from the energy of the street that delivers a unique mix. There is South Beach of course, and a design district, which is becoming more defined, but the Uptown/Downtown civil style divide in NYC isn't showing its face here.

Dennis Leyva, the official 'Arts in Public' coordinator for the City of Miami has been working on a series of installation and mixed-use public projects for some time that have been bringing a wealth of local and international talent into the city. Most recently commissioning installation New York based Artists Brian Tolle and Dan Graham (famous for his conceptual glass and mirrored pavilions) while he's about to get busy on a project with British Artist Gary Webb. Representing a local government who are tapping into the benefit of Art he's also involved in the significant new Frank Gehry, 'New World Symphony Hall' currently under construction, and for which Dutch Architects 'West 8' are designing an ingenious adjacent park space which will incorporate cutting-edge televisual technology into the outdoor site. There's also the planned development of 'Flamingo Park' in Miami's residential district, which will see public Art taken into the suburbs for the first time. Leyva himself points out that "Just look at the people on the beach. The Architecture. Miami is an aesthetes dream. It's no coincidence that people who are into Art also like the other visual aspects of this city".

The power of the visual language exercises itself nowhere more presciently than it does within the city-scape as award-winning Architect Chad Oppenheim knows only too well. A designer who came to Miami from New Jersey lured (such was the pull of that single visual aesthetic) directly by Mann's Miami Vice (brilliantly Oppenheim met Mann years later, who told him that "his work represented his vision of Miami today"). The progressive style, the creative risk-taking and the "general attitude of collective optimism" that he found made the place "intoxicating and he never left". He also mentions the city's association with the mythology of the explorer Ponce de Lyon and the fountain of youth, tracing back the roots of the original Eden complex. Oppenheim and his 35 strong team have been responsible for some of the city's most stunning and characterising landmarks including 'The Vault' (both a storage unit and a showcase for works of Art), 10 Museum Park (a sky-scraping, futuristic luxury residential complex).

But it's Morais' two worlds analogy that most accurately gets to the point of what of the some-time hedonists heaven really is these days. Bruce Webber & Jean-Paul Gaultier's playground is now open to all-comers. A genuine mix of business and pleasure Miami is a city where you can have your cake and eat it.



In a city where all forms of visual appreciation converge, fashion was bound to be on the agenda and in Miami it doesn't get more special than 'Alchemist' created by 28 year olds Roma & Erika Cohen. Pushing on from their super successful multi-brand boutique, stocking designers such as Alaia, Rodarte, Proenza Schouler, they're now working on a second, more conceptual version of the 'Alchemist' space which will replicate the curation of an Art gallery in the way that it will constantly evolve each season – potentially showing only one, or a very small number of designers each season, and with it a regenerating interior – think only the new Alaia collection but in it's full glory, coupled a brand new interior and a whole series of limited edition Marc Newson chairs. The Cohen's are generation who know have witnessed the rise in sophistication and consequently understand both the value of creativity and the power of the tangible physical experience to seduce - especially when the price tag is hitting collectible level. Everything is handpicked eye candy and everything is for sale, surely retailing at it's most transient smart.

This is America's new Utopia, a city transformed by the power of Art and it's pilgrims into a place where the most inspiring intersections of Art, Design, Music, Architecture & Fashion have found such a strong synergies within the city and it's inhabitants that it's in a constant state of regeneration.

For Miami is of course, also a place, which for many has represented the beginning of new life and a complete change in identity. Two of Miami's biggest Art patrons, Rosa & Carlos de la Cruz, who came to Miami from Cuba in the 1960s in the wake of Castro's revolution, when it was culturally languishing in a twilight zone of retirees, experienced the city as exiles and had to forge a new life that effectively meant regenerating themselves. It was a type of forced epiphany that led them directly to Art. Rosa, who describes herself as "more of an activist than a collector" speaks of how the function of Art (as something whose point is essentially not to have a function in the purist sense) felt like an obvious point of reference. "Art is about a virtual reality, and when you're an exile your reality is actually warped, it's slightly removed from real life. I had to change identity as an exile, it made me a look harder". For her Miami is synonymous with the same kind of suspension of disbelief, the same sort of parallel universe quality found in Venice, a dream-space of a place where nothing is real and therefore anything can happen. Consequently she's devoted her career to championing the most exceptional Artists, and her passion for organising difficult or almost impossible Art projects. When she & Carlos' found they'd run out of room in their home for their Art Collection (a home they regularly open to the public, and teaching groups, in order for their Art to remain and accessible therefore have an extended purpose) they simply built a three-storey 'Art Space' (designed by Architect John Marquette) as an extension to the family home so they could procure some more. To her Miami is a true city for the 21st century, representing the best of cross-pollination "it is not a homogenous city, it's more like an island peninsula, it even has two clear languages". For those for whom it's worked, it seems to welcome outsiders, swallowing them whole, but in order to thrive anew.

The other thing the sunshine status of Miami can facilitate more easily than the colder climate of New York is the sheer physical connection that comes with events that require outdoor participation...

In December '09 legendary Art curator from Toronto, Natalie Kovacs, inspired by one of Rosa de la Cruz's charges, AVAF (Assume Astro Vivid Focus who use the initials of their name to mean something different for every project) and backed by the commercial powerhouses of Morgan's hotel group (who own The Mondrian, The Delano & The Shoreclub amongst other), American Apparel, Interview Magazine and Ben & Jerry's curated a project known PDA (Public Display of Art / Peace Dance Art).

Ambitious almost beyond belief, Kovacs commandeered troupes of dancers to lead an enormous flash-mob version of human sculpture on the edge of the ocean in a kind of Spencer Tunick style demonstration of anonymity as a leveller that would allow people to forget whatever else they were doing and take a moment to think about the ecology of the space and the importance of unity in saving it.

The event also constituted a big party of course and one, which continued way beyond the event on the beach, which was exactly the point. The experience of Art was the Art.

As Novacs said, "as a physical reminder and metaphor I spent each and every evening pouring champagne over people's arms while branding them with tattoos. It was a good morning after reminder to participants... by the end of the week I'd gone through 8000 with a team of volunteers".

Commerce meets creativity and nobody's quite sure who within the mutual fun -est (if anyone at all) is exploiting whom.

It's more proof that the presence of Art, and the glamorous, high profile world that surrounds it is permeating the city every way it can, filtering into the civic pride.

The fall-out of the recession, post 9/11 hit New York city where it hurt, and had, whereas the resort city of Miami stayed off the worst with it's sunny side up vacation mentality.

New York's reign as the matriarch of the Art scene, the legacy of the Warhol years and the indestructibility of the Super-Gallerists' creative monopoly (incidentally Steve Rubell of studio 54 fame is the brother of Don Rubell, one half of Miami's most famous Art couple) also appears to have been superseded the charms of a city where a week of fun in the sun can yield serious results.

Norway may have the most millionaires per capita in the world, but Miami surely has the most creative visionaries. Everyone's an Artist or an Artist's best friend.

This year they even have the Superbowl. Art & Commerce, Business & Pleasure; looks like civilisation to me.

Katie Baron