

**Economist.com****OPINION**

Art Basel Miami diary**Enough**

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A ball of artists at the Ball of Artists

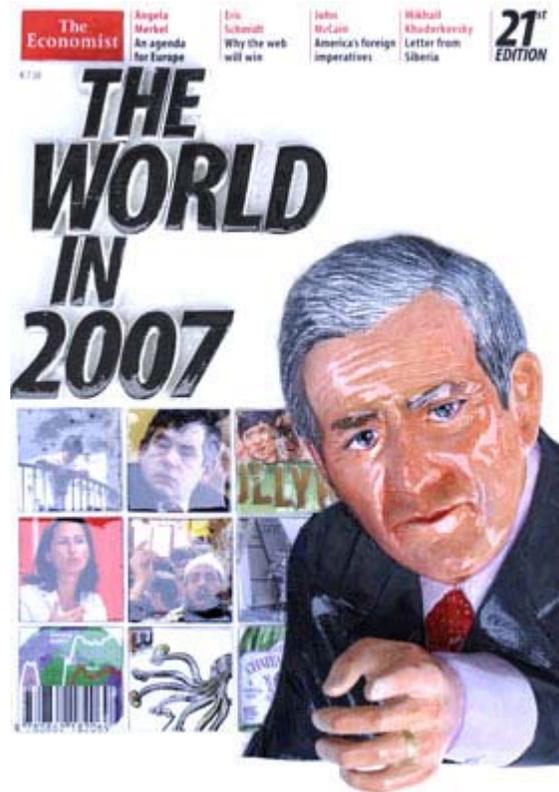
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Thursday

I AM rooted to my seat, transfixed by the images on a screen overhead: a dramatic glacial landscape, sunlight glinting off a choppy sea. Three sea-lions, their slick pelts rippling, gallop in slow motion after a pack of penguins, backed by a soundtrack: "Let it roll, baby, roll/Let it roll, baby, roll..."

I'm at The Lost and Found Saloon in the Wynwood Art District, where the television shows a nature program, the radio plays classic rock and I eat a chimichanga. This would be credible as a half-baked conceptual art piece, I think, and I wonder whether the observation means I've become jaded or enlightened.

Wojciech Zasadni



But is it art?

There has been so much to look at during these four days at Art Basel Miami Beach, and I have been cultivating an open-minded approach—alert to innuendo, hoping to be affected—while summoning everything I learned as an undergraduate in art history class. Perhaps I'm arted-out.

But the SCOPE fair is just down the street, and I'm eager to see it.

Three giant epoxy safety cones, made by Dennis Oppenheim, rest imposingly on the lawn outside the fair. The exhibition space is a large, airy tent with wooden floors and plenty of natural light. I meet Ronald Sosinski, one of SCOPE's founders, near the entrance. He tells me the fair started as a small collection of works displayed at the Gershwin Hotel in New York. "Each year we would have it at a different hotel," he says, "since they were sort of afraid to have us back."

SCOPE holds annual shows in Miami, Basel, London, New York and the Hamptons. SCOPE Miami is in its sixth year, with 98 exhibitors from 22 countries.

Adriana Farietta, SCOPE's director of development, offers to show me around. She explains that many of the artists exhibiting here have work in Art Basel as well, and all the major collectors pay a visit. Though she declines to single out one exhibitor as the star of the show, she is eager to take me to a stand curated by RHYS gallery.

One wall of the booth is dominated by a film showing a boxer in a caged ring who strides in circles, thumping his chest and grandstanding for an audience. But the boxer, Shaun Leonardo, is actually an artist; he trained for eight months to transform himself into a professional fighter. "We built that steel cage for him", says Colin Rhys, the film's director. "It's twenty feet tall, and he body-slammed off the top of it and knocked himself out."

Also on view are several elegant pencil studies of a matador and a bull, each titled "Self Portrait",

all by Mr Leonardo.

Next I visit Program, a Polish contemporary art gallery that opened in 2002 and is here for its first American art fair. A small crowd is milling before a wall of rectangular bas-relief carvings in wood. They are depictions of magazine covers, by Wojciech Zasadni: *Der Spiegel*, with its cover story on "The Power of Faith"; *Star*, featuring British celebrities' "Worst Pics Ever!"; even a 3-D version of *The World in 2007*, *The Economist's* annual year-end publication. Mr Zasadni's work has an old-world craftsman's humility that I find appealing amidst the flashiness of the fair's trendier art.

Ms Farietta and I move along, and are immediately waylaid by a fellow grappling with a person-sized geometric structure made of colourful balloons. Methodically, he inflates a new one, ties it shut, and with a twist of his wrist incorporates it into the sculpture. I ask him if this is a performance.

"You can consider this a performance if you like," he replies, "I've been doing this twelve hours a day for the last two days, and I'm doing it again tomorrow. I'm making three sculptures that will be used in a performance on Saturday."

He introduces himself as Jason Hackenwerth, and hands me a postcard depicting himself wearing an enormous balloon sculpture at his waist. The finished piece resembles an ocean-dwelling crustacean with a human torso emerging from its thorax. Mr Hackenwerth says his performance, "The Madonna Project", will take place at 2pm.

Ms Farietta interjects: "I have you scheduled from 12-5pm."

"Well, the performance will probably be finished at three," Mr Hackenwerth replies, "and depending on how long it takes everyone to sweep up the mess I make, that could be part of the show."

Later, at the Vizcaya Museum in Coral Gables, Art Basel is having its Ball of Artists, a decadent party held on the terrace of a century-old mansion. Guests are allowed to roam the gardens, which feature a piped-in soundtrack of a baritone voice reciting, with conviction, an apparently random sequence of repeating words ("Ambien. Ambien. Asparagus. Ultramarine. Asparagus...").

At around midnight, 160 miles of coiled Mylar streamers are released from the roof of the villa, in a piece titled "Intervention", by Robert Chambers. I watch as the revellers wind themselves into the metallic stuff, and soon there is an actual "ball of artists" on the terrace floor, requiring an actual "intervention"—by uniformed police officers—and I conclude that I am quite arted-out, after all.

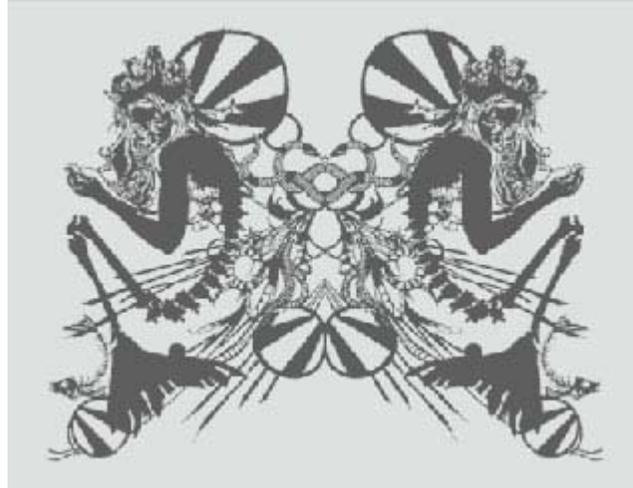
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Wednesday

AFTER my evening stroll through a deserted Art Basel, I drove to the Raleigh hotel, where Deitch Projects put on an evening of outdoor performances. A fully-rigged stage had been erected in the sandy beachfront area, flanked by palm trees and tiki torches. A VIP audience was seated at linen-covered tables. I hovered near the entrance, hoping to glimpse a friend who was to perform with The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, a legendary New York-based glam-punk band led by Kembra Pfahler, a performance artist.

When I arrived the stage was empty, and a scratchy, pulsing techno beat was playing over the speakers. The sound quality was horrendous. I was standing near the production tent, so I questioned the man at the controls. He replied that it was purposeful: the music was being played at full volume through the headphone jack of a stereo system. But why, if it sounds so terrible? He shrugged: "Because it's Art Basel."

Miss Rockaway Armada

**Swoon-worthy**

Thankfully, a lovely band called CocoRosie soon took the stage, and filled the air with harp music and clear, haunting vocals. Then a group of women, painted head-to-toe in brilliant shades of blue, red, yellow and pink tottered onstage in thigh-high boots and enormous black wigs. These were the Girls of Karen Black. Over the next half-hour, they stomped and shimmied through an elaborately choreographed set during which Ms Pfahler was mauled by an enormous wooden shark, drowned in a cardboard sea and ensnared in an oversized animal trap—all without putting down the microphone. I thought I recognised my friend, in yellow, at stage left, but I couldn't be certain.

Today, somewhat bleary-eyed, I'm visiting the Fountain Art Fair: probably the scrappiest of all the alternative art-fairs in Miami this week. Named after Marcel Duchamp's famous ready-made work of the same title, Fountain is unjuried and unsponsored—just a band of smallish galleries from Brooklyn displaying their wares together. They have set up shop in a decrepit warehouse around the corner from the Rubell Collection, a destination gallery with limousines parked outside. When I visit, a county fire inspector is touring the space, eyeing the ceilings.

In the front room, a motorised bike whirs in place, powering a contraption that spins a rubber chicken in circles, thwacking a human cranium at each rotation. The skull, bobbing laterally, its jaw flapping in time with the squeak of the gears, seems to be laughing. The piece is "The Death Slapper", by an artist named Jinx.

Around the corner, I'm drawn to Anna Druzcz's composite landscape photographs, which are so luminous that I wonder aloud whether they are mounted on light-boxes. They aren't, according to Marisa Sage, owner of Like The Spice Gallery; the auras come from a new process of digital processing using a LightJet printer. Regular chromatographic prints can't render golds and silvers in quite the same way, she explains.

At Front Room Gallery's space, I admire Philip Simmons's bright pop-art pieces in glazed foam and aluminium, each with an enticing new-toy shine. Ray Sell's titillating "Wanna Banana" is the standout at Capla Kesting Fine Art.

And then I stumble upon what to me is the most covetable of all the works of art I've seen so far. "Miss Rockaway Armada" (pictured) is small, at 15.5x19.5", and monochrome, white ink on white vellum, so I nearly walked right past it. Words can't do it justice: it's a delicate screenprint of bony mermaids surrounded by serpents and dead fish. The artist, Swoon, is something of a cult hero to fans of street art in New York. She made her name plastering fine renderings of local characters—homeless women, buskers, street vendors—onto abandoned buildings in New York using a paste made from wheat.

"Miss Rockaway Armada" is a reference to a group project, backed by 30 artists and performers, with a mission to float on a homemade raft down the Mississippi River from Minneapolis to New Orleans, stopping along the way to perform and give workshops. ("We are NOT hippies", their website insists.) Swoon's print is number 85, of an edition of 85, and its price is \$500.

Deitch Projects, the host of last night's extravaganza at the Raleigh, are also exhibiting Swoon at their centrally-located booth in the Art Basel convention centre. There, her large lithograph on mylar, titled "The Girl From Ranoon Provence", sold for \$18,000. It will be replaced by a new one, "The Construction Worker", tomorrow.

Here at Fountain, Swoon's work is carried by Christina Ray of Glowlab, a private gallery that specialises in experimental urban art in the spirit of Guy Debord and the Situationists of the 1950s. "Swoon is engaged in finding places that are in need of attention", Ms Ray said to me in an interview this summer, "If you come upon one of her pieces, your perception of that space will change".

And, as I continue my tour of the crumbling warehouse, I realise just how right she is.

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Tuesday

TODAY is Art Basel's opening day. The floor of the convention centre is a honeycomb of booths, all teeming with collectors, and it is nearly impossible to get an unobstructed view of the art. Tom Wolfe, claiming it is the first art fair he has ever attended, will later remark to the *Art Newspaper*, "I was particularly amazed by that crush of people, massed at entrance D waiting for the doors to open like some half-off sale at Macy's... I've never seen anything like it."

Neither have I. I have only a nanosecond to admire the soft contours of Robert Longo's "Untitled (Jane)", an enormous charcoal drawing of a sleeping baby's face, before I'm jostled aside. I surrender my will to the crowd; it's pointless to try to record my impressions. I slide my notebook into my press satchel, a rip-stop nylon affair with a shoulder strap that Art Basel distributes in lieu of the humble press folder given out by other fairs. The bag comes pre-loaded with a 757-page catalogue that is so heavy it creates its own momentum. A sudden halt or quick turn can send the bag swinging in a terrible arc. The book has sharp corners, I note sympathetically, and march along.

Art Basel is in its sixth year, hosting 250 galleries from 33 countries, displaying works by 1,500 artists from the early 20th century to today. Some dealers were worried that America's economic troubles would make the art market founder this year, but each booth I visit reports strong sales and high turnover. The *Art Newspaper* writes that today's visitor numbers are up by 1,000 on last year, and NetJets deployed

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220 private planes to the event—an increase of 10% over 2006.

Somewhere in the tangle of people, I meet a friend from New York who is here on several freelancing assignments. She has been circulating through the fair longer than I have, and she is unimpressed by this year's offerings. "I'm over it", she declares, and invites me to an event at the Ralph Lauren store on Collins Avenue.

The Ralph Lauren party has *canapés*, and pear martinis, and—bonus!—Lance Armstrong. But these attractions don't hold me for long. Within an hour I'm back at the convention centre. As I reach the doors, I see a well-dressed man trying to thrash his way past a team of security guards who are insisting that the fair is closed. I approach slowly, holding my press badge, and I'm allowed through.

The convention centre is a ghost town, and except for some gallery staff and a guard tilting about on a Segway, I'm alone with the art. My footsteps are soundless on the carpeted floor.



For the love of God

I've heard what to expect here: large-scale pieces, because rich collectors have vast walls, and lots of Asian art, because it's hot right now. True enough. But something else strikes me: I'm seeing skulls everywhere.

There's row upon row of them at booth C9, mounted in such a way that they appear to float several inches off the wall, in Gabriel del Mora's installation "Memorial I", hosted by Galería OMR. Blum & Poe Gallery exhibits Takashi Murakami's painting, "Time Bokan—Battles Without Horror and Humanity", a nebulous skull-shape outlined in thin rainbow-coloured ribbons of acrylic, with cartoonish flowers crowding the eye sockets. And Max Wigram Gallery has a film by Barnaby Hosking's that shows hands manipulating clay on a human skeleton. Later, at the Rubell Family Art Collection, I stumble upon Rosemarie Trockel's embroideries in wool, featuring a repeating pattern of skulls against orange tartan, and at AQUA Art Miami, Kelly Lamb's "Artist's Guild", an inkjet print of a skull with gold leaf covering the eyes.

This has to be partially the fault of Damien Hirst. Who hasn't heard of "For the Love of God", the diamond-encrusted skull which became the most expensive work of contemporary ever when it was sold in August for a reported \$100m? And indeed, several of the skulls here are his: White Cube shows "For the Love of God, Laugh", a photo-lithographic print with glazes and diamond dust on paper, and *Paragon Press* hangs his series of skull etchings.

I remember a piece about the *tête de mort's* ubiquity in the fashion world, titled "The Heyday of the Dead", which ran in the *New York Times* last summer. It was illustrated with photographs of skull motifs on a silk scarf, an umbrella, an infant's onesie (bodysuit). Can something so highbrow as the contemporary art market possibly be at the mercy of the woosh and swoop of the zeitgeist?

I retreat towards the exit.

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Monday

"WOULD you like to throw darts at Sue?"

The woman addressing me is Susan Lee-Chun, clad in spiky black heels, a blue plaid jumper and a skullcap topped with a short felt spire. She looks like a warrior from the future, dressed in couture. "Sue" is a photograph of an attractive Asian woman in a blonde wig, a target superimposed over her face. It is already riddled with holes.

"What did Sue do to you?" I ask. "She assimilated", says the performance artist, proffering a fistful of darts.



Welcome to Switzerland in the sand

Ms Lee-Chun's show is Spinello Gallery's contribution to PULSE Miami Contemporary Art Fair, one of the many satellite fairs that take place this week alongside Art Basel Miami Beach, a monster exhibition that draws galleries from all over the world to network, mingle with the jet-set, and, vitally, to sell art.

Though PULSE is a smallish fair for lesser-known exhibitors, its opening party is a true microcosm of the art world: the art-lovers are easily identifiable by their enthusiasm and sometimes by their haircuts, which, depending on the degree of asymmetry, advertise that the individual operates in a realm where flourishes of this sort are not just acceptable but hallmarks of authenticity. Serious buyers cluster hungrily around the gallery directors, eager to nab their favourite pieces (the more experienced of them employ strategic body-blocking techniques: they hold plastic champagne glasses aloft and to one side, taking up more space and threatening to spill upon their competition).

And after the first hour of the opening, the partiers are absent; after all, the DJs (billed as "Japanese Twin Techno Duo Ryukyudisko") started at seven, and both the music and the food are outside. Eventually the majority of attendees move out of the exhibition hall and into the cool night. Some of them have appropriated Jörgen Mayer H.'s grand, undulating "Beat Wave" sculpture as a bench; others hover, napkinettes in hand, near a white-coated butcher operating a prosciutto slicer.

In an elevated wing overlooking the DJ booth, PULSE hosts GEISAI, a shoebox of a show put on by the artists' collective Kaikai Kiki, which is led by the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. The exhibitors are 20 artists chosen from a pool of over 700 applicants from 53 countries. All the artists are independent, meaning they man their own booths, and there's not a red-dot-wielding gallery director in sight.

Eric Doeringer's display catches my eye first, perhaps because it is decorated with garlands of multicoloured triangular flags and hand-written posters touting bargain prices—or perhaps because I instantly recognise the work on the walls: there are Hirst's dead butterflies, Yoshitomo Nara's creepy little girls, assume vivid astro focus's psychedelic pastiche, Marilyn Minter's filthy left foot.

Mr Doeringer says that his knockoff versions of famous works are part of a series titled “bootleg”, and business has been brisk. He is also offering, for \$1 each, custom-designed, 41-cent United States postage stamps featuring the faces of the art world's elite: Samuel Keller, Jeffrey Deitch, Francois Pinault, Don and Mera Rubell, Charles Saatchi, Barbara Gladstone and Larry Gagosian, each emblazoned with “GREETINGS FROM MIAMI”. I buy one of each (and two of Deitch, because he looks so merry in his photo).

In the next booth over, I linger for a while over Blane de St. Croix's objectively uninteresting dioramas of dirt and moss. The artist is standing nearby, and I sense that I shouldn't hurry off without seeming to give his work some brief consideration, so I scan the miniature terrains and wonder how these pieces managed to get selected for exhibition. I'm about to slink away when Mr St. Croix appears over my shoulder and murmurs, “Bin Laden was hiding somewhere in there.”

He explains that this particular piece is an obsessively faithful scale model of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. And over here—he leads me to another landscape—is the border between North and South Korea, which has been untraversed by humans for so long that wildlife has flourished. And another is the border between Mexico and the United States, complete with the proposed chain-link fence and its controversial two-foot overhang into Mexico. Fascinating stuff, after all.

I wander through the other booths (admiring Masamitsu Katsu's stereo system in graphite and Maria Adelaida Lopez's model houses in vacuum dust) and back into the courtyard, where the Twin Techno Duo has turned up the volume. I join a crowd near a massive wheel of *parmigiano reggiano*, where I meet Brian Doyle, a video artist whose eerie documentary on Celebration, the Disney-run town, is part of a continuous reel featured in PULSE.

Back inside PULSE, Winkleman Gallery's booth displays a large plexiglas box atop a podium. A diagonal partition splits the box into two compartments. One compartment holds black bracelets with the slogan I'd rather be hot than rich; the other side has white bracelets that say I'd rather be rich than hot. There is a sign that reads “Please take one”.

At the beginning of the evening both compartments were full. I've checked back to see which version was more popular, but the numbers are dwindling equally—as far as I can tell—on each side. Edward Winkleman, the gallery's owner and director, explains that most people grab one of each.