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Art Basel: a sensory circus, with a few clowns included

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Garance Massart Blum and Jane Shindle look at a life-size stuffed deer covered in crystal balls entitled 'Pixcell-Red Deer' by artists Kohei Nawa. The piece sold for \$450,000.

Call the 11th edition of Art Basel the year that the race to take in all of the must-see works all over town, the wheeling and dealing, the champagne guzzling, the celeb sighting, the luxury brand-subsidized partying — finally all boiled over.

You're a bejeweled duo of ladies from Italy, fabulous in designer labels, beyond practiced in the art of getting your way wherever you go in the world? You were still not getting in to the white-on-white 60th anniversary party for Moncler atop the 1111 building on Lincoln Road Friday night, no matter what Moncler muckety you claimed personally invited you or the scale of the meltdown you indulged in at the velvet ropes.

This past week, the biggest, most jam-packed, most financially successful Art Basel yet saw well-heeled temper tantrums galore, as flabbergasted VIPs from all reaches spewed profanities in an impressive array of languages at stone-faced doormen (and the millennial version of the girl with the clipboard, namely, the girl with the iPad) who have stopped countless people cold outside swanky events by Chanel, Cartier, Dior Homme, Fendi Casa, Dom Perignon, Carrera and more.

But thankfully, this year's sensory circus, which finally folds up after Sunday, has also been about art. From the Wifredo Lams, Ai Weiweis, Man Rays, Jenny Holzers and endless more stellar works at the main fair inside the Miami Beach Convention Center, to what has been generally deemed as extraordinary quality at satellite fairs such as Art Miami, Miami Project Art fair, Design Miami and others, Basel week hasn't forgotten its reason for being, no matter how many brands piggy-back on the largest contemporary art fair in the world to market their fizzy water, champagne, shoes, watches, cars, condos, private jet companies, down coats and just about every luxury item imaginable to captive, deep-pocket crowds.

And pointing to the end of the Great Recession, for many in the wealthiest classes, anyway, dealers at the main show have been reporting mega sales, as have many of the nearly two-dozen satellite fairs that have pitched tents and taken over hotels and warehouses.

“Collectors have been feverishly looking this year,” said Brook Dorsch, of Wynwood’s Dorsch Gallery, who reported brisk sales from his booth at Pulse at the Ice Palace production studios near Overtown. “It seems people have finally recovered from their financial losses. When the economy crashed, everybody pulled back. But this year, they’re all back with a vengeance.”

Miami Project Art Fair, a new entry in Midtown Miami, is also reporting killer sales, prompting managing partner Max Fishko to declare they’ll be back in 2013.

“I was aware that this was a very oversaturated market. But we knew people would immediately understand the difference at our fair, where you don’t feel like you’re coming into some crammed, noisy cattle market,” Fishko said Saturday. “I think people are feeling expansive this year. There may be a little less going on at the low end of the market, but the middle and high end seem to be coming back in a very strong way.”

But for all world-class public art, for all the street artists working day and night to finish murals in Wynwood, for all of the packed public and private museums offering some of the best art in the world — there was a clear negative: a blown-out party scene.

Scads of the smugarati got shut down outside pop-up nightclubs such as Chez André at the Shelbourne’s downstairs karaoke joint, by Paris’ Le Baron nightclub and hotelier André Balazs; and Silencio, David Lynch’s Mulholland Drive-inspired Parisian cabaret, doing a Basel residency at the Delano. And there was the beachside blowout at the Soho House, hosted by Chanel, where Demi Moore danced it out but mortals packed like sardines could barely reach the bars to beg for beverages. That’s if you got in at all, even after you were invited, even after you RSVPed.

“I RSVPed for the Chanel party and later received a message saying, thank you, but we can no longer accommodate you,” said Amy Rosenberg, director of the Overtown Music Project. “I was clearly outranked by a Russian oligarch or a supermodel. It was a first for me. I had never been disinvited from a party.”

Call this also the year of the curious revelation. Who knew, for example, that Martha Stewart, in town to shop the convention center and make cameos at some of the most coveted parties, spent a lot of time as a child in — wait for it — Hialeah.

“I had an uncle who lived in Hialeah. I came down all the time,” Stewart said at the champagne-fueled opening for Dior Homme in the Design District. “He was a mechanical engineer for Eastern Airlines. I’ve been watching Miami evolve for a long time. Every year it gets better and better.”

And who knew the Freedom Tower is said to be haunted in a most delicious way?

“I was here in the middle of the night the other day, still painting, when I heard conga music,” artist Ruben Toledo said at the Thursday night opening of Toledo Toledo: Full Circle, a show featuring his work and the work of his wife, Isabel Toledo, the star fashion

designer who dressed Michelle Obama for the 2009 presidential inauguration.

The Cuban-born Toledos were both processed at the Freedom Tower when their families reached exile in the 1960s. In addition to being known as Miami's Ellis Island, the historic tower was also the place where queen of salsa Celia Cruz laid in state in 2003 as hundreds of thousands of fans filed by her coffin.

"All of a sudden the music stopped. Somehow, I knew it was Celia," Ruben said. "Later I talked to some of the security guards and they said that they've all seen Celia and heard her music. She's still here. I got chills."

And in Wynwood, the spirit of the recently deceased Tony Goldman burned brightly. Goldman, a force behind the neighborhood's reincarnation as an arts hub, was celebrated Thursday by his family, friends and more than two-dozen internationally famed street artists who all sat down to a formal dinner at the graffiti park he founded, Wynwood Walls, in honor of his birthday.

"He would be over the moon tonight," said daughter Jessica Goldman. "Look at everything that is going on in Wynwood tonight. Look at all of the art and all of the artists in the neighborhood. What's happening here is exactly my father's vision. And I plan to do my best to keep moving that vision forward."

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