

IN MIAMI, ARTISTS AND DESIGNERS CONFRONT GLOBAL ANXIETIES

by Samantha Tse



Woody De Othello's "Cool Composition" (2019).

An installation made of sand is always going to be temporary, and that was the point of Leandro Erlich's 66-vehicle traffic jam along the shores of Miami Beach.

The Argentinian artist was commissioned by the city of Miami Beach to produce the sand display, titled "Order of Importance," for Miami Art Week. Over time, the structure is designed to crumbled -- and eventually disappear.

It's a comment on the climate crisis, set on Miami's low-lying beach, one of the locations particularly vulnerable to rising sea levels.

The city has been the centerstage of the art and design world this December, with creative forces uniting for Art Basel and the Design Miami.

A \$120,000 banana stole the show at Art Basel -- before and after it was eaten -- but there was much more on display that didn't make the headlines.

Environmental themes dominated, expressing artists' anxiety about what the future holds, including Woody De Othello's oversized home fan cast in bronze, which sat among ceramic stools and almost barren citrus trees.

"Artists live in the real world and their work reflects that," Art Basel global director Marc Spiegler told CNN.

Design Miami runs alongside Art Basel every December and this year its theme was "water."

“We wanted to build a program around Miami being on the front lines of climate change and sea level rises,” explained Aric Chen, Design Miami’s curatorial director. “What design can do is offer alternatives and new possibilities to maybe solve some problems but in a broader way to really help us navigate this situation that confront us as a species.”

One of the projects included a live stream of coral reefs in Biscayne Bay, Florida, by art-science duo Coral Morphologic. They’re working with scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Florida International University to document how coral is able to survive submerged on the edge of a highway connecting Miami and Miami Beach.

The Coral Morphologic team installed a camera underwater for guests to observe the stunning beauty of the fragile marine ecosystem in real-time.

The environmental theme extended to reusing and recycling. Russian designer Harry Nuriev collaborated with Balenciaga on a project emphasizing fashion waste.

“Balenciaga doesn’t burn any of their clothes and that’s how we came up with the idea of using the off-cuts -- they asked me how I can reduce all the extra clothes,” Nuriev said, referring to the practice by some luxury brands to burn unsold stock.

He stuffed an L-shaped sofa made of scrapped plastic from a previous project with discarded off-cuts and damaged textiles.

Projects included in Instagram’s #designforall campaign were housed in a bulbous, entirely recyclable booth designed by Studio Swine.

“We created an inflatable that fits into a suitcase for packing down and reuse after this fair,” explained Alexander Grove of Studio Swine. “So by next Design Miami its footprint is absorbed.”

As well as showcasing their environmental credentials, fairs including Art Basel and Design Miami are becoming more conscious of the need for more diversity.

Earlier this year, a joint investigation by In Other Words and artnet News found that women artists were still grossly under-represented by galleries, and only 2% of purchases at global auctions were for works produced by women.

This year, Art Basel Miami Beach included the works of African-American artist Faith Ringgold, presented by the London-based Pippy Houldsworth Gallery.

Gallerist Pippy Houldsworth selected a group of Ringgold’s work that was displayed earlier this year at London’s Serpentine Gallery, including early paintings, quilts and acrylic paintings on canvas mounted onto fabric.

“I think especially for an art fair, it’s relevant and exciting to see a solo booth of curated works by an important female artist,” said Houldsworth. “It encourages people to come and look at them in a new light.”

At Design Miami, Galerie Patrick Seguin and Magen H Gallery displayed the work of modernist designer Charlotte Perriand, whose retrospective is currently on display at the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris.

Silvia Venturini Fendi, who has long championed female designers, commissioned Swiss duo Sarah Kueng and Lovis Caputo, from studio Kueng Caputo, to create a series of works referencing the brand's HQ.

The resulting work utilized Fendi's signature Selleria leather and juxtaposed it with glazed terracotta bricks to create arched tables, wavy stools and curved benches.

"Nurturing today's young female designers is not only rewarding personally but it helps to propel the innovators of tomorrow," Fendi told CNN in an email.