

ARTSY

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Who's Buying the Enormous Artworks at Art Basel

by Alina Cohen



Installation view of Woody De Othello, *Cool Composition*, 2019, in Jessica Silverman and Karma Gallery's booth, at Art Basel in Miami Beach, 2019. Courtesy of Art Basel, Karma Gallery,

Standard booths on art fair selling floors aren't amenable to large-scale artworks. Try mounting a 50-foot-long tent or a multi-channel video, and you'll find there's little space for anything else. To accommodate galleries' desires to show such ambitious art, the 2019 edition of Art Basel in Miami Beach debuted a new sector, "Meridians." The Grand Ballroom in the newly renovated Miami Beach Convention Center offered an ideal hosting space, just an escalator ride up from the main show.

Meridians's first iteration, which featured 34 projects organized by Museo Tamayo director Magalí Arriola, served as an experiment for the Miami Beach fair and its participating galleries. However, the idea is not new: Sections for large-scale works have been integral to Art Basel's fairs in Basel and Hong Kong, called "Unlimited" and "Encounters," respectively, for several years. At Meridians, artworks ranged from Tom Friedman's giant tableau of a cocktail party to Isaac Julien's nine-screen film, *Lina Bo Bardi—A Marvellous Entanglement* (2019). Woody De Othello's canary yellow, 8-by-8-foot bronze fan towered over viewers, while a complex Candice Lin sculpture offered a steadily dripping tincture of tobacco, sugar, tea, poppy, and piss. By looking at the works that sold at Meridians, we can get a picture of the market for large-scale artworks—as well as evidence of Art Basel's competitive edge in the vast art fair landscape.

To show in Meridians, galleries already accepted into Art Basel in Miami Beach submitted proposals to the fair's selection committee—a group of prominent dealers including Friedrich Petzel, Chantal Crousel, Mary Sabbatino, José Kuri, Tim Blum, and David Fleiss. Arriola noted that the team whittled down the presentation from around 70 submitted proposals; winning entries were high-quality works that met the regulations—entries must be single, large-scale works.

Both institutions and private collectors proved keen to buy massive art. By the evening of the Meridians preview, Valerie Carberry, partner at Chicago's Richard Gray Gallery, noted that two out of three editions of their work—Theaster Gates's film, *Dance of Malaga* (2019)—were already on reserve. The interest, she said, was “mostly institutional.”

Yet Paul Gray, the gallery's managing partner, recalled that he sold a 10-meter-high Jaime Plensa outdoor sculpture during the 2007 edition of Art Basel in Miami Beach. It cost the gallery “the better part of \$100,000,” he said, to just transport the work and install it. Collector John Pappajohn purchased the monumental piece for his sculpture park in Des Moines, Iowa. “Most of our business is with private collectors,” Gray said. “Some of them have large ambitions, from the Rubells to people with sculpture parks to people who just have space for one enormous thing. Some people just acquire because they're so moved by the work, and they never install it at all.”

Galleries' participation in Meridians could also aid a public relations push. Galerie Lelong, which has been showing at Art Basel in Miami Beach since its first edition in 2002, exhibited work by three artists—Samuel Levi Jones, Ana Mendieta, and Barthélémy Toguo—in the Grand Ballroom. “Our goals in exhibiting at Meridians were to attain exposure for the work and draw attention to the ideas behind it, both of which were successfully met,” said Sabbatino, vice president and partner at Lelong, referring specifically to Jones's *Talk to Me* (2015). The wall-mounted work covered with old law book covers—which challenges the legitimacy and equity within our legislative language—gained attention from the public as well as curators.

Sean Kelly discussed his \$475,000 Jose Dávila installation, which featured lights wrapped around a tree, in similar terms. The piece that featured in Meridians is on reserve to a foundation and prompted the sale of several other works by Dávila, Kelly said.

Some purchasers at Meridians were private collectors with intentions to display their work in public venues. Portia Munson's *The Garden* (1996), presented by P.P.O.W, made news when it sold at the VIP preview on Tuesday evening for \$225,000. Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, who run 21c Museum Hotels, purchased the maximalist installation, which resembles a frilly bedroom decked out with stuffed animals and floral patterns. The couple plan to show *The Garden* in one of their properties, which host exhibitions.

Throughout the week, Jessica Silverman Gallery and Karma sold De Othello's hulking fan, entitled *Cool Composition* (2019), in three editions, for \$175,000 each. Silverman confirmed that private U.S. collectors on the east and west coast bought the works. The two galleries equally split the cost of the booth and the sculptures' fabrication, as well as the revenue. De Othello was able to make the work in Miami, his hometown, which diminished the galleries' financial burdens. Silverman also contributed to mounting Julien's video. She said that her artists' works in Meridians “drew further attention to [her] main fair booth as well.”

Most of the Meridians projects had at least one gallery based in the Americas supporting them. And of the Meridians sales that were reported, all buyers were based in the United States. Almine Rech said that she sold John Armleder's new pour painting, *Stetson* (2019), to “a new institution from Texas that will open its doors in 2020.” Los Angeles gallery Morán Morán also found an institutional buyer: Torey Thornton's large-scale painting on panel, which resembled an off-kilter Twister game, sold to an undisclosed museum.

Galleria Continua, which has locations in Italy, Cuba, China, and France, sold *Planas* (2005), a suite of 365 drawings by Jose Antonio Suárez Londoño, which carried an asking

price of \$450,000.

These success stories are hardly unique to the Miami iteration of the fair. Last spring at Art Basel Hong Kong, a private Chinese museum purchased Lee Bul's enormous silver zeppelin sculpture, *Willing to Be Vulnerable—Metalized Balloon* (2019), from Lehmann Maupin, PKM Gallery, and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac. The behemoth, priced at over \$200,000, was featured in the fair's Encounters sector, which wove throughout the main selling floor. At Art Basel in Basel, art regularly sells in the Unlimited sector, situated in the Messeplatz near the main fair.

Unlimited, which featured over 75 works in its 2019 edition, organized by Hirshhorn curator-at-large Gianni Jetzer, is by far the most ambitious of the trio. Initiated in 2000, the sector has become a distinguishing feature of the Art Basel brand. "There are 200–300 art fairs around the world now. There's only one Art Basel Unlimited," said Noah Horowitz, Director Americas at Art Basel. "Although the art fair paradigm has been copy-pasted everywhere, [opportunities to show] ambitious projects at scale is extremely limited." Meridians particularly benefits galleries based in the Americas, for whom shipping giant works to Basel for Unlimited is pricey.

As mega-galleries continue to mount shows they deem "museum quality," Art Basel takes similar steps to give their shows a dose of institutional clout. Major curators organize Encounters, Unlimited, and Meridians. Horowitz noted that in the future Arriola will be able to commission art for the fair and work with artists directly. As the line between institutional and commercial settings grows ever thinner, one hopes that artists themselves will ultimately benefit, gaining opportunities to produce ambitious new works for an increasingly spectacle-hungry audience.