

Dissenters Transform the Art Showcase

By Caroline Roux

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Not everyone loves an art fair, even if they want to sell art. In 2004, Joe Amrhein of Gallery Pierogi in Williamsburg, New York, decided he was among the dissenters.

"There really are plenty of negatives about the fair format," says Amrhein, and many of these – the strip lighting, the bad air, the endless "streets" lined with identical three-sided booths – will be familiar to frequent visitors.

"Some artists really dislike the commodified aspect of it all, and we wanted to have more comprehensive possibilities of how to show work."

With New York gallery owner Ron Feldman, Amrhein hired a space first in the Design District of Miami and in subsequent years in the Wynwood area, where ancillary art fairs such as Pulse, Scope and Art Miami also take up residence for the duration of Art Basel Miami.

In 2006 they were joined by Paul Hedge of Hales Gallery in London, and this year they will – along with four more galleries – be taking more than 24,000 sq ft over two floors. They've even got a title this time, "Seven Miami", but they still don't do PR or advertising, simply relying on their own lists to spread the word.

This set-up is partly born of logistics. For less than the price of the tiniest booth at Art Basel, the group can have the space and flexibility to install bigger work in a more curatorial way. And they are not alone in wanting to claw back a bit of control.

"We had so many enquiries from galleries, when we mentioned we'd expand the group, we could have started a fair," says Hedge.

But the gallerists, who also include BravinLee, Winkelman, Postmasters and P.P.O.W, emphasise intimacy and atmosphere over footfall.

"We can be spontaneous," says Amrhein. "We can compromise and give each other the right space for the work each one brings. One year, [conceptual artist] Ward Shelley decided to create an installation of boxes. It was purely about giving pleasure, though we sold some drawings on the back of that.

"But it's not always about breaking even, it's about reconnecting with curators and collectors."

Owner Paul Hedge has never quite done things by the book. He opened his first gallery in Deptford, south London, with a café upstairs serving delicious Italian food. When he moved it to Shoreditch, east London, in 2004, it was only to bury it deep inside the Tea Building, with no street presence but a bright red door. In Miami, he will be showing what he calls urban abstraction by artists including Andrew Bick and Richard Galpin.

"The art world is very conservative," says Hedge. "The private views, the cards, the catalogues. I'm sure they all had a role once, but now surely it's time to move on."

Elsewhere in Miami, a mass of off-piste events occur, from art installations in hotels, such as Olaf Breuning's intervention at the bungalow-lined pool of the Standard, to a show of the legendary 20th-century Colombian photographer Leo Matiz at the Miami-kitsch Dorissa Building (owned by the Maldonado family).

Ironically, though, the most freewheeling of these – Primary Flight – is about to clip its wings and land in its own project space in the Design District. Since 2007, this collective of street artists has spread its urban art message over the walls of Wynwood's warehouses every December with vast graffitied murals, including the 30-foot man by Retna that adorns the western wall of the building belonging to the Margulies family's foundation. Now Retna will have his own retrospective in PrimaryProjects' warm and dry 4,500 sq ft space. Moving on, but perhaps not in the way Hedge had imagined.