

## The Grio.com Review: Art Basel goes 'Afropolitan'

by Ludlow E. Bailey | December 8, 2013 at 1:35 AM



**Melvin Edwards, "John Henry for John Scott" (2012) Welded steel.  
(Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York)**

**M**IAMI BEACH. Fla - [Basel Miami Beach](#) 2013 turned 12 years old this year, and it has clearly come of age.

Basel is no longer just a city in Switzerland. It is now used as both a verb and a noun by those drawn to Miami Beach for the four-day "[winter meeting of the international art world](#)." It's a kind of post 21st Century word with multiple uses, roughly translated as "bliss and beauty." As experienced at the show to end all art shows, Basel means to laugh out loud while overindulging the imagination with art and [music](#) or to dance from your heart without caring who is watching. And it's a destination where multi-cultural artists rule.

With the presence of more artists of African descent than ever, Basel is also increasingly an amalgamation of rock and roll, the blues, and Yoruba rituals with a mixture of classical West African High Life, salsa, [hip hop](#), regalia (reggae) and meringue. It is Rashaad Newsome, Wangechi Mutu,

Mikalene Thomas, Yinka Shonibare, Armando Marino, Kehinde Wiley, Christopher Cozier, Hank Willis Thomas, Ellington Robinson, Alexander Arrechea, Amadou Yacine, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Shinique Smith, Nick Cave, El Anatsui, Betye Saar, but also Kendrick Lamar, Swizz Beats and Pharrell.

You might call it "Afropolitan."

Basel Miami Beach (BMB) is young, but it already has far more potential than the original: Basel Switzerland. And that's in no small part because "Basel on the beach" is significantly more multi-national and diverse. BMB 2013 was a wonderland of contemporary world culture with a pulsating global African presence.

### **Highlights of BMB 2013**

- In 2013, Jack Shainman Gallery continued to dominate the contemporary Africana Art market at BMB. The gallery has an outstanding collection of work from artists Nick Cave, Lynette Boayke, Toyin Odulata, Hank Willis, Carrie Mae Weems, Kerry James Marshall, Odili Donald Odita and Radcliff Bailey.

- Lynette Boayke has been rising steadily in the contemporary art world. The Ghanaian born artist was recently short listed for the Turner Prize in Britain. She also won the prestigious Putnik Prize at this year's Venice Biennale. The New Perez Miami Art Museum recently added her work to their collection. Miami art Collector Dennis Scholl (Trustee of the Perez Museum), is a major fan and says her work is very "sensitive and compelling." Her mastery is revealed in the precision in which she paints and captures the figurative gaze.

- Kerry James Marshall's untitled black male painting with the Black Nationalist flag was by far the most commanding work at Jack Shainman Gallery. It is an exceptional representation of Kerry James' masterful painting skills. Professor Horace Brokington from Columbia University said that Marshall's work might very well be one of the best Africana pieces in this year's BMB fair. It sold for \$400,000.

- Isaac Julien's "The Abyss" was mesmerizing. (Slide 17) It took my breath away.

- Hank Willis, who has attended 10 of the Art Basel fairs, said he was "delighted with the range and quality of the Africana work at BMB this year." He was particularly impressed with the Mikalene Thomas's work at the show, which he said demonstrated a meteoric growth in quality and execution.

- The two South African Galleries (The Goodman from Johannesburg and the Stevenson Gallery from Cape Town) in the main show had some of the most outstanding African Diasporic work in the Convention Center.

- Meschac Gaba's "Citoyen du Monde" (citizen of the world), inkjet print on synthetic canvas, edition of 3, work was one of the most striking and fascinating pieces in the show. The artist used images of all the flags of the world to create a multi-dimensional piece that was full of light, energy and color. Gaba is from Benin and currently lives between Cotonou and Rotterdam. In 2013, The Tate Modern, London presented his Museum of Contemporary Art (1997-2002) a 12 room installation which fuses art and daily life. Gaba's work was also exhibited in the Havana Biennale in 2006 and Documenta 11 in 2002.

### **A growing African presence**

The Global African Presence at Basel 2013 continues to grow. This year saw the introduction of two new African centered fairs: Prizm and Miami Fusion. The iconic Betye Saar (creator of the infamous "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima") was honored by Miami Fusion with a lifetime achievement award. At eighty seven years old, she is still raising hell and challenging the status quo with her provocative pieces.

Meanwhile, the Global Caribbean exhibition has carved out a distinguished reputation for outstanding shows during the Basel Week. This year's show featured the work of Miami-based Caribbean artists Glexis Nova, Noelle Theard, Rodney Jackson, Fabian Pena and Misael Soto.

The Betsy hotel has become the venue and the meeting place for the Afropolitan Art connoisseurs and is a requisite destination for Global African Art and art salon conversations during Basel. A highlight was Caribbean Artist (Trinidadian) Christopher Cozier's light box Installation, "The Arrest: Hands up, Hand out." Cozier's imagination is unfathomable. He uses light and color to create parallel universes that are as powerful as the energy of matter.

The salon conversation at the Betsy on "Creative Collaborations in the 21st Century" was co-moderated by Lowery Sims, Saul Ostrow and Leslie Hammond King, and was very informative, interactive and engaging. The audience and dialogue was multi-cultural and global. All three moderators demonstrated a deep sense of knowledge and perspicacity of their subjects and in turn orchestrated a welcome and open discussion that inspired participation from a compelling audience of artists, writers, fashion designers, film makers, architects, photographers, curators and academics.

The pace of Art Basel Miami Beach week is no doubt peripatetic, hectic and intense, but the experience is well worth it.

*Ludlow E. Bailey is a writer, cultural curator and international art broker.*