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ART

Gauging the Potential of Abstraction at Art Basel Miami Beach

Questions of privilege aside, the range of abstract works reminded me how artists are providing nuanced ways of thinking about identity that move beyond exclusion/inclusion binaries.

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Samuel Levi Jones, “Talk to Me” (2015) presented by Galerie Lelong in the “Meridians” section © Art Basel (image courtesy of Art Basel Miami Beach)

MIAMI BEACH — Dan Gelber, the mayor of Miami Beach, noted at the press preview for Art Basel Miami Beach that this year marked the 18th edition of the fair. At some point during the numerous shout-outs to Norman and Ira Braman, the local super collectors who have been credited as instrumental in bringing Art Basel to the city, I noticed that I was one of the few darker-skinned people in the room. This is not an

unusual experience for me in the art world but I did scribble “where are the people of color?” in my notes.

Almost on cue, Marc Spiegler, the global director of Art Basel, noted that during the decade he had been with the fair, he had witnessed the rise of African American artists such as Kara Walker and more recently Sondra Perry and Jacolby Satterwhite. There is much to celebrate regarding the growing interest in the work of Black artists, but we have only scratched the surface. While he did not claim that the art fair was in any way responsible for this visibility, the implication was nonetheless there. His statement reminded me of a recent article in the *New York Times* in which the newspaper’s co-chief art critic Roberta Smith (who, like Spiegler, is white) glibly writes of “the rising presence of black artists [in the Frank 2010s] of every ilk, on every front.”



Bowling, “Africa to Australia” (1971), acrylic on canvas, 110.6 x 262.2 inches; on view in the “Meridians” section (Hales Gallery) (all images by the author for Hyperallergic, unless otherwise stated)

Her words feel woefully out of touch given the dearth of work by Black artists in major museum collections and more like wishful thinking. A three-day event provocatively titled “Who Owns Black Art?” outside of the official Art Basel fair brings this point to the fore.

At the same time, when I entered the main fair, I was reminded how artists are providing us with complex, nuanced ways of thinking about subjectivity and identity — race, gender, sexuality, etc. — that move beyond exclusion/inclusion binaries. I was especially surprised that much of this was happening not through figuration but abstraction, of which there was quite a bit on view. Consider, for instance, Frank Bowling’s large-scale diptych “Africa to Australia” (1971) in the fair’s new section “Meridians” (a curated selection of works proposed by galleries, which included Hales Gallery’s presentation of Bowling’s) and one of several of his works displayed at Art Basel, such as in the

Mnuchin Gallery booth. If you look closely enough, faint outlines of the titular continents (as well as EurAsia) are discernible, but overall the medley of the bright field of colors emphasizes the space between borders like the ocean, and its role in the forced movement of subjects across continents.



Fred Wilson, “Sala Longhi/A Moth of Peace” (2011-2019), black float glass, antiqued gold painted wood frames, Murano-blown glass, light bulbs, dimensions variable; on view in the “Meridians” section (Pace Gallery)

Also included in Meridians is a melancholic installation by Fred Wilson, titled “Sala Longhi/A Moth of Piece” (2011-2019), which incorporates his first Murano glass-blown white chandelier and a series of black panels in antique wood. The latter was meant to evoke a painting cycle depicting the daily life of the bourgeoisie in eighteenth-century Venice, installed in the Longhi room of the Baroque palace Ca’ Rezzonico. Making elegant cuts in the panels where the faces of Venetians would be located,

Wilson's use of the economy of abstraction evokes something more sinister at play.

Back at the main fair, works by Agnes Martin and her contemporary Cy Twombly in the Pace and Galerie Karsten Grieve booths, respectively, lean towards the phenomenological. Martin's "Untitled #2" (1990) depicts a grid of horizontal blocks of grey and white. However, the painting is spatial rather than flat: as one moves closer to the canvas, what is figure and ground seems to flip. As Jonathan Katz has argued, her work brings into being a subjectivity that is more aligned with the blurring of self/other that is typical of Buddhism. Katz even implies that Martin's work could be seen as prefiguring queer theory. Similarly, Twombly's "Untitled (Gaeta)" (2004) instantiates a feeling of what I have described elsewhere as "queer Zen." The work of Christina Quarles, a more emerging, contemporary painter represented by Regen Projects, possessed a similar quality. In her painting, "Night Fell Upon Us (Up On Us)" (2019) limbs twist improbably around various forms, blurring subjects and objects. Taken together, these works point to the queer potential of abstraction.

Works dealing with gender through abstraction were also on display. For instance, in the Marc Selwyn Fine Art booth, Hannah Wilke's glazed white porcelain sculptures challenge abstraction and femininity as two irreconcilable positions. The works initially appear as post-minimalist abstraction, but on closer inspection they are actually vulval forms. A surprise for me was coming across the abstract works of another feminist artist in the Eric Firestone Gallery booth: Miriam Shapiro, an important force behind the



Cy Twombly, "Untitled (Gaeta)" (2004), acrylic on wood, 99 1/4 x 72 3/4 inches; on view in the Galerie Karsten Grieve booth

short-lived US Pattern & Decoration movement, . I actually had no idea she worked in abstraction before this and am keen to re-think her practice with this knowledge.

Artist explorations of identity aside, while walking through the fair, I did not really see many people of color. This was not terribly surprising especially given I was there during the press preview. The fair is now open to the public and this weekend I suspect will bring a deluge of visitors. In years past, my experience has been that a much broader cross-section of the public attends the fair then, including “locals” like myself, who see the Art Basel as not only a site of privilege but also as a place to see new art while it’s in town.



Installation view of Hannah Wilke’s work at the Marc Selwyn Fine Art booth

Art Basel Miami Beach continues through December 8 at the Miami Beach Convention Center (1901 Convention Center Drive, Miami Beach, FL)