

No Man's Land review – Miami's Art Basel week kicks off with all-female show

Rubell Family Collection, Miami A counterblast against pervasive art world sexism, this show winds up as a great cross-section of cultural production today – and the men aren't even missed

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This past summer the magazine ArtNews published a special issue on the status of female artists – and the statistics it presented affirmed that the art world still has a whole lot to improve. Less than 30% of the exhibitions at America's leading museums go to women. The share of women in major group exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale and Documenta, is far below parity. Women get less attention than men, by some margin, in America's top art magazines. And then there's the market: only three in 10 artists with gallery representation are female, and prices for art by women lag persistently behind their male counterparts.

So it's a statement of intent to mount a show featuring only work by women – and not in an effort to find some essentialist, "female" character of art, but simply as a cross-section of cultural production today. That is what the collectors Don and Mera Rubell have done with their impressive, if infelicitously named, No Man's Land. It's a worthy showcase of more than 100 artists, every one of them female, which has opened at the start of the heaving, surge-priced, champagne-soaked "social rat fuck" – the term is Larry Gagosian's – that is Art Basel week in Miami Beach.

Miami's a funny place when it comes to institutions. The city's museums don't yet bat at the level of an art world capital, though they have improved in the last two years. (The Pérez Art Museum Miami is showing a substantial cross-section of work by the Jamaican artist Nari Ward, while the under-construction Institute of Contemporary Art has mounted a rare exhibit of Alex Bag, a pioneer of lo-fi first-person video in the 1990s.) Yet Miami is home to a handful of very ambitious collectors, who encouraged a staid Swiss art fair to set up a winter edition. These collectors – among them Rosa de la Cruz, Martin Z Margulies, Ella Fontanals-Cisneros and the Rubells – present their hauls in their own warehouse spaces, open to the public for free, in a formerly rundown neighborhood rechristened the Design District. The Rubells' space, for one, formerly served as a warehouse for the Drug Enforcement Agency, and stored not

paintings and photographs but cocaine and AK-47s.

No Man's Land is not a museum exhibition; it's a private collection showcase. But the Rubells are shrewd and unorthodox collectors, and the presentation raises some big points – above all, the enduring question of how women artists building on a male-dominated history of art should depict their own sex. The American artist Lisa Yuskavage paints a flax-haired young woman with a single breast exposed, in tender light; she has sex appeal, but Yuskavage's is a curious rather than lecherous gaze. The South African painter Marlene Dumas, by contrast, goes rougher and sleazier; her portrait of a pin-up, christened Miss January, appears in a glittery top and no underwear, her mouth overly lipsticked like a kabuki villain. Cindy Sherman photographs herself as a man out of a 16th-century portrait, her skin deathly white, her femininity barely discernible.

Yet most of the art here has no special interest in gender; the whole presentation works more than fine as an art world cross-section, and you really don't miss the men. When it comes to abstract painting, anyway, women have been leading the way for more than a decade now. Norway's Ida Ekblad, one of the most fearless painters working today, is represented by three bold abstract works, two of which required her to drag a shopping trolley across the canvas. Laura Owens, scion of Los Angeles's booming art scene, is here with a still life with fruit bowl that's as if Cézanne got put through a dozen Photoshop filters. The deep-thinking RH Quaytman continues her recursive practice with groovy circular patterns deriving from unearthed archival images. And four intricate and obsessive paintings by Jennifer Guidi translate the beaches of the Pacific into thousands of irregular dots, halfway between Seurat and indigenous Australia.

Most of the art here is American or European, though there are some noble exceptions; the fantastic young Nigerian artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby is represented by a killer collage, depicting her and her husband in a tender moment on the dance floor. It is, nevertheless, a welcome corrective to an artistic conversation that remains exhaustingly male-dominated, decades after the Guerrilla Girls began naming and shaming sexists. Really, its best legacy would be if it convinced the Rubells' fellow collectors, whose private jets are now touching down at MIA, to buy more female artists' work when they traipse through Art Basel this week. After all, art by women remains – stubbornly – a bargain.

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