

Miami artist Mark Handforth in front of his *Electric Tree*, 1998–2001, part of the MOCA collection, in North Miami's Griffin Park.

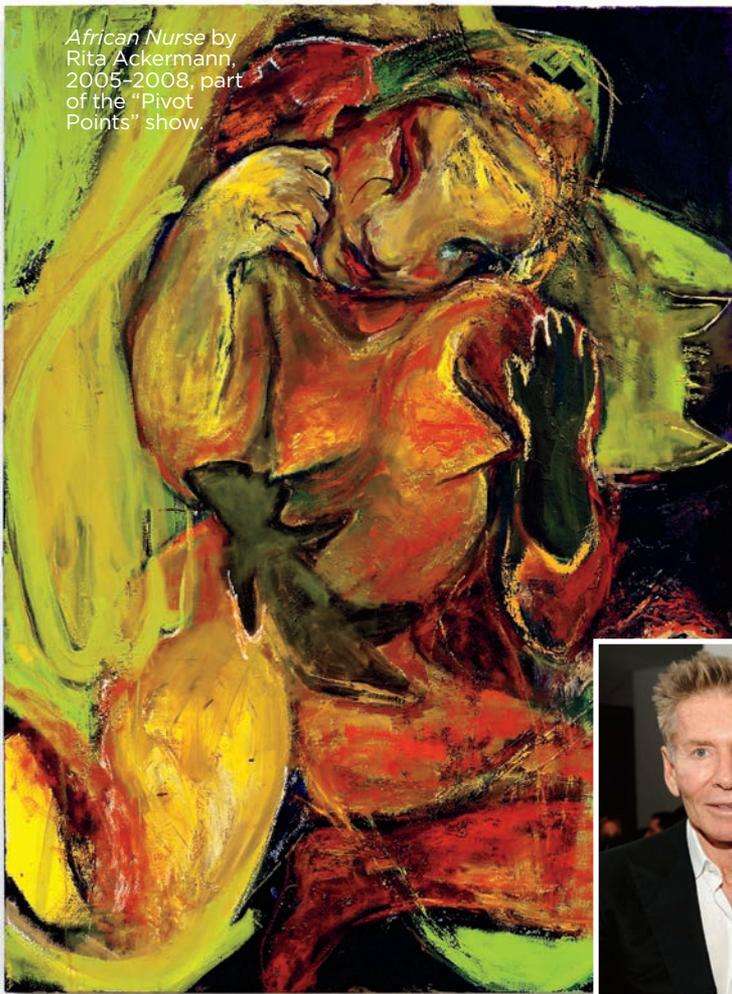
moca goes back to the future

THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART TOASTS ITS OWN COLLECTION OF AVANT-GARDE WORKS WITH "PIVOT POINTS: 15 YEARS AND COUNTING." BY BRETT SOKOL

Talk about chutzpah. When North Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) opened its doors in 1996, the debut exhibition all but heralded South Florida's coming moment in the art-world sun. That survey show's title said it all: "Defining the Nineties—Consensus-Making in New York, Miami, and Los Angeles." At the time, such a name raised plenty of skeptical eyebrows and under-the-breath rejoinders. Whatever our city's merits, was it really an art town to be discussed right alongside the creative precincts of New York and Los Angeles?

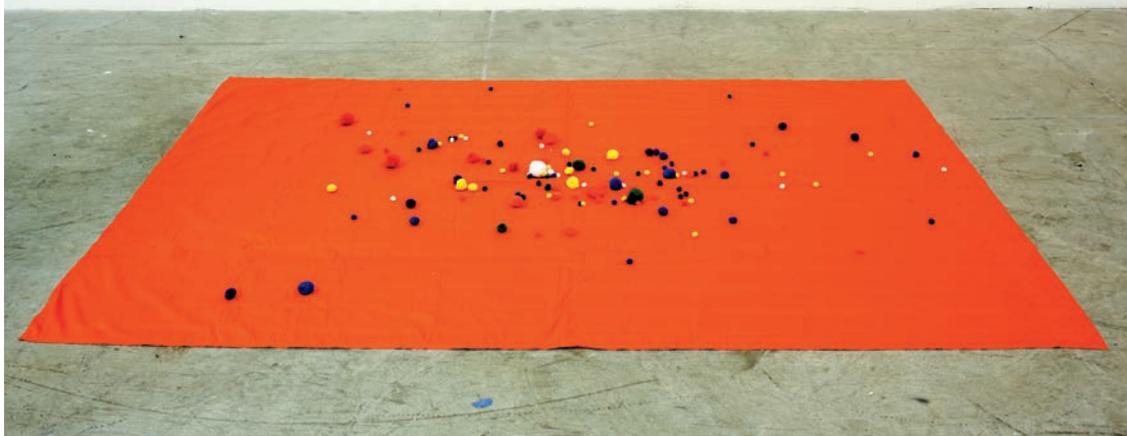
No one's snickering anymore. Seventeen years and nearly 200 exhibitions later, both Miami and MOCA are firmly on the international art-world map, a position dramatized by the museum's annual Art Basel party—a packed bash that has become the de facto kickoff event for December's Miami Beach fair,

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PRESCOTT McDONALD



African Nurse by Rita Ackermann, 2005–2008, part of the “Pivot Points” show.

A new artwork by Rick Ulysse, part of “Pivot Points.”



MOCA Executive Director Bonnie Clearwater (CENTER) with Calvin Klein and Donna Karan at the museum’s annual Art Basel party in 2011.

After 17 years and nearly 200 exhibitions, Miami and MOCA are firmly on the international art-world map.

drawing a who’s who of jet-setting curators and collectors. That celebratory spirit underlies MOCA’s latest show, “Pivot Points: 15 Years and Counting,” which spotlights more than 25 different works from the museum’s permanent collection, and all obtained in just the last two years. But the idea isn’t simply to show off a scattering of acquisitions, explains Bonnie Clearwater, MOCA’s executive director and chief curator.

“It’s not just ‘here’s one thing, here’s another,’” she says. “It’s an exhibit which explains the context the artists work in.” To that end, “Pivot Points” features dedicated groupings, including one room exploring the geography of South Florida and its effect on homegrown talent. “A lot of artists play with the mythology of the Everglades and its mysterious nature,” Clearwater continues, pointing to an approach equally on display at “Pivot Points” in the photography of Naomi Fisher, the paintings of Hernan Bas, and the films of Ali Prosch, Onajide Shabaka, and Juan Carlos Zaldivar.

Clearwater is also quick to stress that making room for locals is hardly a new gesture on the museum’s part. “That emphasis was already there with COCA and Lou Anne Colodny,” she says, referring to MOCA’s earlier incarnation as the Center of Contemporary Art under the directorship of Colodny. Indeed, Colodny (who stepped down as MOCA’s first director in 1997 and returned to being an artist, swapping an office for a studio) ushered the institution from a one-room, 1,500-square-foot exhibition space housed inside North Miami’s former water department building to its present 7,400-square-foot home. And the admiration is mutual: “Bonnie has taken it where I wanted it to go,” Colodny enthuses. “She has a great sense of the pulse of the art scene, while still building a bridge to history.” That has meant staging shows with emerging—and subsequently internationally fêted—Miami talents such as Bhakti Baxter and Mark Handforth (both featured in “Pivot Points”),

as well as shows featuring an older Miami painter like Salvatore La Rosa, who had already spent decades fashioning inventively tweaked portraits before the museum even opened its doors.

Still, if the art world is now fully on board with MOCA’s place in the cultural firmament, the city of North Miami—which owns the museum—seems a bit less convinced. Plans to more than triple its exhibition space are on hold after voters were unwilling to approve a tax hike, narrowly shooting down a \$15 million bond issue this past summer. “The board is going through all the options, as is the city,” Clearwater says, declining to elaborate on whether that means another ballot attempt or a renewed search for private funding. North Miami City Councilman Scott Galvin, a bond issue supporter, chalked up that lost vote to poor local outreach: “You see Pat Riley and Calvin Klein at MOCA parties, but not the president of the homeowners’ association or the chamber of commerce,” he told the *Biscayne Times*.

For her part, Clearwater remains resolute in her vision of showcasing the best of Miami’s contemporary tyros alongside the cream of the past. She’s particularly bullish on Rick Ulysse, whose featured “Pivot Points” sculpture is a bit of a departure from his previous drawings seen during the museum’s recent “Trading Places 2” show—many of which vividly explored his Haitian heritage. His more abstracted work—complete with brightly colored pom-poms—will appear alongside and “in dialogue with” one of Joseph Cornell’s celebrated diorama-like boxes.

“When I talk to someone like Rick Ulysse, I can feel him channeling Joseph Cornell, whether he knows it or not,” Clearwater chuckles. “There’s a similar sense of generosity—their artworks were both made with the viewer in mind, and with the idea of making the viewer feel good!” That pleasure principle may often seem like a foreign concept in much of today’s art world, but Clearwater insists it’s a vital part of MOCA’s mission. “I want people to walk inside here and say, ‘This is *our* museum.’” “*Pivot Points: 15 Years and Counting*” is on exhibit through May 5 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 770 NE 125th St., North Miami, 305-893-6211; mocanomi.org. E-mail: brett@oceandrive.com **OD**