



VISUAL PLAYERS

AS OCEAN DRIVE CONTINUES TO CELEBRATE ITS 20TH ANNIVERSARY,
WE HIGHLIGHT SOME KEY FIGURES WHO HAVE MADE A LASTING
IMPACT ON MIAMI'S ART AND DESIGN SCENE IN THE PAST TWO
DECADES, AND DISCUSS WHAT THEY HAVE COMING NEXT.

BY OMAR SOMMEREYNNS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY PRESSCOTT MCDONALD

WORLD-CLASS COLLECTORS

DON AND MERA RUBELL

Don Rubell was engulfed in his studies at the Brooklyn College Library when he first saw Mera. It's a classic love story—one that entailed a marriage proposal on their first date and a shared passion for collecting art soon after they wed in 1964. "We got to know the artists in our neighborhood when we took our daily walk," Mera Rubell says. "And we worked out payment plans so we could buy art on our limited budget," a mere \$25 per month. "In the beginning, it was about our commitment to each other and to the artists."

Critical Moves: In 1992, they came to Miami and began developing real estate, including the Albion Hotel on South Beach and properties on Lincoln Road. But the pivotal moment was in 1993, when they purchased a 45,000-square-foot former DEA/confiscated goods warehouse in Wynwood. It now houses one of the world's most prominent contemporary art collections, with more than 5,000 works by the likes of Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, and Cindy Sherman—a relocation that proved to be a catalyst in attracting the art

world to the area. Moreover, they saw an opportunity to bring the prestigious Switzerland-based Art Basel to the US for a winter edition in the warmer climes of Miami, convincing then-Miami Beach Mayor Neisen Kasdin and Commissioner Nancy Lieberman to visit with the fair directors. "What's exciting about Basel is it's not just a buying event," she points out. "It's about people from everywhere engaging in art and coming together in Miami."

East Meets West: Currently, the Rubells are busy planning their next big exhibition, which will open in December and feature works by 25 Chinese artists, and also a retrospective book spanning 50 years of collecting. "We were attracted to Miami because we could afford space here for our collection that we couldn't have in New York, but we didn't envision how evolved the art scene would become," Mera says. It's hard to say whether we would have such a vibrant Wynwood or an American Art Basel without the Rubells. But one thing's for sure: They were—and remain—dauntless visionaries.

Don and Mera Rubell at the Rubell Family Collection with Thomas Schütte's *Grosse Geister #2* (*Big Spirits #2*) (2003).



GALLERY KING FREDRIC SNITZER

Few gallerists in Miami can claim to have had such a meaningful, propitious, and long-standing influence on the trajectories of the artists they represent as Fredric Snitzer. Starting in Coral Gables in the late '70s and then moving to Wynwood in 2002, Snitzer has played a crucial role in nurturing the careers of several local artists, even propelling some—such as Hernan Bas, Naomi Fisher, Bert Rodriguez, and José Bedia—into the international spotlight.

Nurturing Talent: When choosing artists, Snitzer says, "The number-one factor is how I respond to the work. After so many years, it's not really about what I would hang in my own apartment, but understanding what a particular artist's intentions are and how successfully he or she achieves those, whether it's abstract painting or conceptual art. Plus, these days, it's about how we get along, so personality and how much they are invested in their career long-term come into play as well."

Global Prestige: The Fredric Snitzer Gallery is also the only Miami-based space that has consistently shown at Art Basel Miami Beach since it landed here in 2002, and Snitzer himself remains the sole local member on the Swiss fair's exclusive selection committee. In addition to Miamians, Snitzer has been adding compelling outside talent to his roster, including the Canadian, Los Angeles-based artist Jon Pylypcuk and his disquieting alien figures. This month, Snitzer is having a solo show for Miami-born Bas, now a renowned artist who has since moved to Detroit to live a more cloistered life focused on his work. It's a much-anticipated return for Bas, whose growth Snitzer has devotedly fostered, saying, "I hope I have, beyond just selling pieces, made a difference in the lives of some artists."

Fredric Snitzer in his gallery with Alexander Kroll's *Self Portrait with Ariel's Leg* (2012).





ARCH INNOVATORS

LAURINDA SPEAR AND BERNARDO FORT-BRESCIA

As heads of Arquitectonica—an international architecture, interior design, and planning firm that launched here as an experimental studio in 1977—Bernardo Fort-Brescia and Laurinda Spear have created some of Miami's most recognizable buildings, whose designs are as diverse as they're able to leave indelible impressions: the grand, elliptical AmericanAirlines Arena downtown; the iconic Atlantis on Brickell condominium (immortalized in the opening credits of *Miami Vice*, with its signature sky court cutout); and the appropriately whimsical Miami Children's Museum off the MacArthur Causeway, to name just a few.

City in Transition: Looking forward, Fort-Brescia and Spear remain keen proponents of Miami's urban revitalization. "From the beginning, we believed in Miami's modern DNA," says Fort-Brescia. "The biggest turn it has made is its rediscovery of urban life. It started as the ultimate urban resort, temporarily lost its way into suburbanization, and is now back on track with a force."

Brickell Boom: The most salient example of Arquitectonica's vision for Miami's pedestrian-friendly reurbanization is Brickell CityCentre, an upcoming, \$1.05 billion mixed-use development smack in the center of the Financial District. "Brickell CityCentre integrates into the city fabric through four blocks of streets shaped by mini-blocks," says Fort-Brescia. "It vertically combines retail, hotel, office, theater, and residential uses. It is open-air instead of frozen by air-conditioning—[an environmentally sensitive canopy] captures sea breezes and provides shade. And at 5.4 million square feet, it is one of the largest private projects [of its kind] under construction in the country, telling of this again-booming, yet green, sustainable urban-tropical city."

Laurinda Spear and
Bernardo Fort-Brescia
at the Arquitectonica
headquarters.

Bonnie Clearwater at MOCA in front of Yinka Shonibare's 2002 installation *Lady Na Master*, 27 Dutch wax-printed fabric dolls on a wooden table.



SCENE MAKER BONNIE CLEARWATER

When Bonnie Clearwater decided to permanently move to Miami in 1990, she had already sensed a prospective glint in the local scene, having worked as the director of the Lannan Museum in Lake Worth in the late '80s. "There was a great program there, and I always felt like there was similar opportunity down in Miami," she says. "There were already some big collections and working artists. There was potential."

Building Buzz: About a decade later, Clearwater took over as executive director and chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in North Miami and put together a show called "Defining the Nineties: Consensus-Making in New York, Miami, and Los Angeles," which gathered works and collections from artists from or based in all three cities. "People thought I was being presumptuous by aligning Miami artists with ones from New York and LA, but I wasn't. I was just recording what was happening, although of course it looks kind of pathetic compared to where we are now. The scene's become greater than what even I could imagine."

Art World Cred: Since then, Clearwater has organized many stimulating shows—from solos for Frank Stella and Albert Oehlen to the recent retrospective on vanguard video artist Bill Viola—and authored many books, including a major monograph on Mark Rothko. She helped build a small but relevant permanent collection for MOCA, which now counts more than 700 pieces—with significant contemporary works by the likes of John Baldessari, Dan Flavin, Dennis Oppenheim, Nam June Paik, and Raymond Pettibon—and she was instrumental in pushing local artists into the limelight by giving them museum exposure early on. "We did our first big solo show of a Miami artist with Mark Handforth," she remembers, "and he's gone on to have a great career."

Great Expectations: Now, as MOCA works on expansion plans, Clearwater retains a sanguine outlook for the Miami art scene: "We have even more collectors moving here, from both Latin America and the East Coast, and there are major artists setting up here, too; Tracey Emin just bought a place, and we're presenting the first big US solo museum exhibition of her work this coming December. Today, Miami is a city where artists can develop and thrive."

George Sánchez-Calderón in his studio working on *Vacas Flacas*. *Technicolor*.

MAJOR CREATOR GEORGE SÁNCHEZ-CALDERÓN

Cuban-American George Sánchez-Calderón always thinks big, often creating works that cannot be contained in a gallery to engage viewers on both an intellectual and visceral level. Case in point: In 2003, a group of developers extended space to him in what is now Midtown (before the buildings went up), where he set up a sprawling, carnivalesque installation that included celebratory fireworks, a Ferris wheel, six stages (for poets, dancers, musicians, and actors), an Afro-Cuban band, cheeky banners depicting various collectors (e.g., a Lichtenstein-like close-up of a full-lipped blonde's face, cooing into a phone, "Oh Marvin," referring to the collector Marvin Ross Friedman), and a preaching reverend in the center, offering to marry or baptize anyone willing. "It was like a *tableau vivant*, and the people entering it, both performers and visitors, made the piece come alive," Sánchez-Calderón recalls.

Daring Execution: That was during Art Basel Miami Beach, just when he, arts advocate/curator Nina Arias, and developer David Lombardi had branded the Wynwood Arts District, and galleries were mottling the area. A couple of years earlier, he had built an awe-inspiring, 80 percent scale reproduction of Villa Savoye—Le Corbusier's prototypical modern home in Poissy, outside of Paris—under the I-395 overpass, sharply collocating an example of streamlined, modernist ideals with urban despair in an area, as he wrote in a statement about the piece, "infamous for prostitution and the [dealing] of crack-cocaine and heroin."

Out of the Box: Most recently, as part of the inaugural *Unscripted* public art project in Bal Harbour, the artist, always pursuing his encompassing, multidisciplinary approach, installed a re-creation of a Levittown-style house, referring to a post-WWII conception of the suburban American Dream. In March, he set the house ablaze to symbolize the collapse and reinvention of that "dream" in our post-financial-crash reality. Not exactly a gallery-friendly process, but certainly a conversation-starter. His work, he says, is "a personal investigation of political, social, and architectural forces that have made profound impressions upon the iconography, systems, and rituals that touch all of our lives. I aspire to create a discourse outside of the white cube."



DOWNTOWN LEADER

THOM COLLINS

Although Thom Collins hasn't been involved in the local scene as long as others, the director of the Miami Art Museum (MAM) deserves credit for taking on a mammoth task with unflappable aplomb—namely, transitioning the institution to its breathtaking, cutting-edge new building on Biscayne Bay, designed by the progressive, Pritzker Architecture Prize-winning firm Herzog & de Meuron.

No Slowing Down: Slated to open in December, the Bicentennial Park site has been making headway since Collins joined MAM in 2010. "As with any major project, there have been myriad challenges, but none of them insurmountable," he says. That might mean playing peacemaker between the contractor and the architectural firm, or holding rather heady chats with his staff about whether the permanent collection should be experienced in a linear or non-linear manner. Given that he helped plan the \$34 million Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati (designed by Zaha Hadid, also a Pritzker winner) as chief curator from 2000 to 2003, and that he's shown interest in Hispanic artists—he is noted for securing a \$1 million donation to establish an "art of the Americas" curatorial position as director at the Neuberger Museum of Art—he seemed a particularly good fit to lead MAM into its new incarnation as PAMM (Pérez Art Museum Miami, named after developer Jorge M. Pérez, who gave \$40 million in cash and art from his own collection).

Promising Future: The new museum should have more space to attract world-class traveling exhibitions and showcase more works from the permanent collection, yet the size of the latter has always been a point of discord. Still, in 2010, MAM owned just over 700 pieces, but since Collins took over, that number has increased to more than 1,300, including gifts of about 100 works from Pérez and 300 from the collection of Dennis and Debra Scholl. As Collins points out, "Collectors in Miami have really begun to step up to ensure the city has in PAMM a resource appropriate to a rising international and cultural capital," and he promises similar announcements in upcoming months.



Thom Collins at MAM holding Diego Rivera's *Mujer frente al espejo* (1919).



DESIGN FORCE

CATHY LEFF

You can thank Cathy Leff for bringing The Wolfsonian-FIU to its current stature as a leading museum, library, and research center concentrating on “the persuasive power of art and design,” as set forth in its mission statement. Having joined the institution as interim director in 1996 (and named permanent director in 1998), Leff was critical in transforming the private collection of Mitchell “Micky” Wolfson Jr. into a public museum, which presently houses around 120,000 pieces in a variety of media, from furniture and industrial design to rare books, paintings, and textiles, spanning 1885 to 1945.

High Concepts: “We’re more than a collection of objects—we’re a museum of ideas,” she says. “We’ve become a civic landmark and, more importantly, a public meeting space that fosters discussion which connects our collection to the issues and events of our time.” Leff has seen the Miami art and design landscape change firsthand, insisting that it is moving from “hype to substance—from inventing a history to having a rich history.”

Breaking Barriers: As for the museum itself, Leff explains that over the next few years, improvements will include renovations, state-of-the-art storage, enhanced staff capacity, and an expanding endowment. But perhaps most ambitious of all on the agenda is her plan to not only provide greater physical access to the collection but also put hundreds of thousands of images and records online, so the works can be viewed from anywhere around the world to establish an extensive and invaluable resource for visual and material culture. “We hope this will inspire knowledge creation, content generation, sharing, and dissemination among users defined by interest, not by geography,” she says. “And I hope it will allow others, known and unknown to us, to use our collection for their own work and enjoyment.” **OD**

Cathy Leff at The Wolfsonian-FIU with a 1929 window grille from the Norris Theater, Norristown, Pennsylvania, manufactured by the Conkling Armstrong Terra Cotta Company.

