

Visual Arts

Pink sloths in trees and hip-hop pottery: welcome to Design Miami

This year's fair is a riot of experimentation and innovation, including work from Satoshi Yoshiizumi and Roberto Lugo



'Street Shrine 1, A Notorious Story' by Roberto Lugo (2019) © Wexler Gallery, Neal Santos

Caroline Roux AN HOUR AGO

When pink sloths hang from the trees of Miami's Design District, it's a sure sign that Design Miami has come to town. The neighbourhood has become a playground of luxury retail since the fair started there 15 years ago. Its current home is an impressive double-gabled marquee that looks the Convention Centre — where Art Basel Miami Beach takes place — right in the eye. Inside, on day one, was a fair that deserved its reputation as the best there is for new and experimental design.

“Fifteen years ago, people didn't really see contemporary design as collectible,” says Craig Robins, the developer largely responsible for the emergence of the Design District, and whose logistical and financial support has been fundamental to Design Miami's existence. “But they've come to understand its value.”

Once upon a time, the fair emphasised vintage design, but nowadays new work gives the event its edge. “We bring the freshest, brightest things we have,” says David Alhadeff of the New York and LA gallery Future Perfect, which this year included a bright blue dresser and dark green table by artist Matthew Day Jackson. Both are made of cardboard coated in fibreglass and finished with glossy car body paint. The purveyors of 20th-century work, such as the New York and Chicago-based dealers Converso, with its elegant arrangements of pieces by Osvaldo Borsani, work best as quiet breathing spaces in a visually noisy and animated fair.



'Pink Beasts' by Fernando Laposse at Design Miami 2019 © James Harris

Innovation was also evident in the fair's Curio section, where 15 galleries, curators and individual designers have been invited to create small, single-artist displays. Among this year's selection, the Tokyo-based designer Satoshi Yoshiizumi stood out with an otherworldly vase made from crystal-clear resin dotted with circuit boards and twinkling LEDs.

At the Wexler Gallery from Philadelphia, a triptych of large-scale ceramic urns formed a dramatic centrepiece. According to artist Roberto Lugo, they refer to the impromptu shrines that dot some US cities, commemorating people who have been shot.

While real-life street shrines are ephemeral, Lugo wanted to make something in clay. He decorates his outsized works with the faces of deceased rappers Biggie and Tupac, as well as the teddy bears and flowers he sees on the street.

Lugo is sometimes called the hip-hop potter — a title he doesn't mind, he says, fresh from news that he'd received the Rome Prize. "There's something of the underdog about 'potter', and I certainly came from a poor educational background. I chose ceramics so I wouldn't be expected to write anything."

And those pink sloths? Some hang from the rafters of the fair itself. They are by Fernando Laposse, a young designer based between his native Mexico and London. The animals' "fur" is made from sisal, derived from the agave plant and dyed with cochineal.

"Sloths are the pandas of Latin America," says Laposse. "We see them everywhere, doing nothing. I think they are sending out a message, telling us all to slow down." Despite the encouragement, there was little sign of that at Design Miami. It was fast and fabulous.

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