

The New Criterion

The beat goes on at Art Basel

by [Franklin Einspruch](#)



Robert Natkin, Chaote, Acrylic on canvas, Hirschl & Adler Modern.

One year ago this week, a Bedlamite attending Art Basel Miami Beach assaulted another fairgoer with an X-Acto knife, and passersby mistook the scene for performance art. This is the same annual gathering that the critic Christian Viveros-Fauné condemned as a bastion of “cultural conservatism” in *Artnet News* in December 2015. “Despite the presence of troublemaking pieces on the stands of a few choice booths . . . the vast majority of the stuff on view, irrespective of its quality, occupies a narrow bandwidth of well-heeled, mid-cult art appreciation. Up until now, ABMB had prided itself on being smart, edgy and sexy. Today it’s about as rousing as a corporate financial statement.” Viveros-Fauné went on to cite “the surfeit of stuff repeating the most recent auction experiments” as evidence of a “rightward turn of contemporary

collecting,” further proven by the fact that certain billionaire art collectors had donated to Republican campaigns.

What alien species is this art fair crowd, at once reactionary, yet so aesthetically open-minded that they think “art” when witnessing a stabbing? The truth is that since its first iteration in 2002, ABMB has been a blank screen upon which art writers have projected their anxieties. This year’s fair is no exception. “It’s been hard to think about anything besides the new president-elect, or how every check I deposit helps fund the poisoning of the sole water supply at Standing Rock,” wrote Monica Uszerowicz about the fair in a review for *Art Agenda*. “But the show must go on, even if pre-existing economic and racial disparities feel nails-on-a-chalkboard loud, even if the shiny lacquer of a trade show seems unusually ostentatious.” At *The Guardian*, the headline over Anna Furman’s epistle read, “Art Basel Miami: how the art fair landscape reflects Trump’s America.”

The art world threw its combined weight against the Trump campaign, and the impact could have been measured in nanograms. Its chroniclers are feeling acute chagrin, and they are taking out their impotent frustrations on a blameless art fair.

Such is the state of art’s influence on contemporary politics, even as critics cling to the supposed necessity of art’s political import. I watched as a large electric sign at Blum & Poe’s ABMB booth, upon which Sam Durant had digitally scrawled “End White Supremacy,” cast its ineffectual scarlet glare upon pale gentlemen milling about with cell phones to their ears. No one who could afford such a thing or a house big enough to put it in could possibly be free of complicity in “white supremacy” as it is conceived of by contemporary *bien pensants*. Besides, a cynical adage about art says, “If you can’t make it good, make it big, red, and shiny.”

There is a better way. Galeria Millan of São Paulo showed *Poema*, a photographic series from 1979 by Lenora de Barros that depicts her in an oral conflict with a manual typewriter, culminating in a flurry of keys snapped down on her tongue. The military dictatorship ruling Brazil at the time was a foe of critical expression and de Barros captured the fraught atmosphere with visceral force. It’s not that political art is wholly futile, but that it requires this level of courage and imagination even to penetrate its own moment, much less to outlast it. In a similar

poetic mode was Mimmo Rotella at a dedicated booth in Art Positions, organized by Robilant & Voena. Rotella's images rely on the decomposition, hastened along by the artist, of advertisements, and thus reveal the limits of the consumer project even as they grant it its due for the richness of its graphics.

ABMB has often been derided as a playground for the wealthy, but it's also an opportunity for those who don't jet around the globe to let the globe come to them. Michael Dean, a British artist represented in Berlin by Supportico Lopez, showed his humanoid lumps of ceramic standing in a circle around the space. Francesca Minini of Milan displayed one of Armin Boehm's vibrantly colored Cubist party scenes. Instituto de la Visión, a gallery in Bogotá, showed the recent abstractions of Sebastián Fierro, which he created by painting landscapes with colors and shapes that exceed the confines of representation. A Mexico City gallery, José García, featured a convincing nonobjective painting by the French artist Benoît Maire, all the more notable for Maire's immersion in theory and his sprawling multimedia practice, which usually diminish an artist's formal abilities.

ABMB goes further than any satellite fair to transcend its essential nature as a trade show. Its "Kabinett" program, which dedicates spaces to single artists, gave Hirschl & Adler Modern the opportunity to install four paintings by Robert Natkin in close proximity. *Untitled (Hitchcock)* is an especially strong piece, with the artist's signature use of geometry and dotted textures resulting in a glowing canvas. Likewise the Kabinett that Two Palms assembled of watercolor monotypes by Stanley Whitney. His freehand geometries are made even more charming by the casualness of the medium. The basic project of art continues, regardless of whatever one might interpret