

artnet news

Jessica Silverman: "We Went on a Whirlwind Tour of Art Basel Miami Beach With Patron and Collector Sarah Arison. Here's What Caught Her Eye"

By Sarah Cascone

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Sarah Arison. Photo by Nick Garcia, courtesy of National YoungArts Foundation.

Arison, a Miami native who lives in New York, still visits Florida monthly. What better person to take us on a tour of the fair?

For most art collectors, Miami is a once-a-year pilgrimage. Philanthropist and patron of the arts Sarah Arison, however, was born here, and remains deeply embedded in the local art scene, despite having lived in New York for the past 17 years.

She often visits monthly, and sits on the boards of more cultural organizations than most people visit in a year. That made her the perfect person to shadow at the VIP preview of Art Basel Miami Beach as I dove back into the madness that is Miami Art Week after a two-year wait.

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I met Arison at the fair at 11 a.m. for the start of the preview. (Neither of us had scored a coveted first-entry time slot, but the guards weren't checking that—the fair's head of VIP relations, Irene Kim, had given her advance notice that the times were just a "soft suggestion.")

Arison had been there since 9:30, when the Meridian section for large-scale projects opened. She'd gotten to Miami over a week ago, for the 40th anniversary party of the [National YoungArts Foundation](#), founded by her grandparents to support emerging artists. (Arison now serves as its chair.)

"I stayed through for Thanksgiving with my family who are based here, and escorted my husband and my toddler back to New York on Saturday, then took the 6:45 a.m. flight back on Sunday, and here we are," Arison told Artnet News.



Sarah Arison mapped out her day at Art Basel Miami Beach ahead of time. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

Taking two back-to-back flights up and down the East Coast was not about slow her down. First off, Arison wanted to show me Hank Willis Thomas's large quilt at Meridians, made from the red and white stripes of American flags. Willis was both a friend and a collaborator, as YoungArts had partnered with his artist activist collective [For Freedoms](#) for a project on its Miami campus.

"Hank is wonderful and such a good friend," Arison said. "He's done a lot of quilts, with everything from flags to sports jerseys."

As we turned away from Thomas's piece, Arison was swept up in a hug by another For Freedoms [artist, Zoe Buckman](#), and Michi Jigarjian, the president of the [Baxter St Camera Club](#) of New York as well as a YoungArts board member. Arison has also enlisted Buckman to work with YoungArts as a master teacher, a position the artist accepted on the condition she be allowed to curse during her instruction.

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"I can't talk without cursing," Buckman proclaimed.

Arison had plotted a course for the four of us through the fair, crisscrossing the massive convention center to hit up some 20 or so booths among the hundreds of offerings.



Sarah Arison and Zoe Buckman with the latter's work with London's Pippy Houldsworth Gallery at Art Basel Miami Beach.
Photo by Sarah Cascone.

"It's so overwhelming," she admitted, before setting out toward toward the first target, David Zwirner.

There, director Tor Shannon greeted her enthusiastically, reminiscing about trying on her pink crochet Prada dress—Arison is five foot 10—at the beach the previous afternoon. The booth had "a few unknowns," he joked about the opening wall of historic work by Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, and Donald Judd, as well as younger figures such as ceramicist Shio Kusaka, the wife of painter Jonas Wood.

"It's a real broad, *pu pu* platter of the gallery's program," Shannon said.

As we wound our way through the convention center maze, we ran into former PS1 MoMA development director Angela Goding, who left the New York museum last October to join YoungArts around the time that Arison was promoted to chair of the institution's board.

"Oh my god, this is like the best group ever! I literally just walked in the door and it's only the best, fiercest, most kickass women," Goding exuded, before running off to meet another friend and promising to link back up later.

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Taking a look at her map of highlighted galleries, I asked Arison what she looked for as a collector at Art Basel Miami Beach. She surprised me by saying buying anything isn't really on her agenda for the fair.

"I collect in a very personal way. I would say 90 to 95 percent of what I own, I have met the artist, spent time with the artist, and maybe collaborated with them on something," Arison said. "I don't think about seeing something on a wall and buying it—it's more relationship based."

To illustrate, our next stop is [Kohn Gallery](#), which currently has a solo show of Ilana Savdie on view back in Los Angeles. Arison had first encountered Savdie's colorful paintings, which sell for up to \$85,000, at Titus Kaphar's New Haven residency program [NXTHVN](#), and fallen in love.



Sarah Arison and Joshua Friedman with a painting by Ilana Savdie from Los Angeles's Kohn Gallery at Art Basel Miami Beach. Arison bought a painting by the artist at the gallery's current solo show. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

"We met at NXTHVN, then I visited her studio in Brooklyn. When I heard she had this solo show, I bought a piece," Arison said.

Gallery owner Michael Kohn, overhearing, was impressed. "That's amazing you were so diligent about it," he said, after the two introduced themselves.

As director and partner Joshua Friedman talked to me about the artist, Arison shared her collecting philosophy with Kohn.

"I cannot have a single piece in storage. Everything I own is on my walls. Aggie Gund is one of my mentors, and when I was a teenager, she taught me you never sell a living artist," she said. "People come to me and say, 'I want to start buying art. What can I buy now that's going to go up in five

years?’ I say, ‘You shouldn’t be buying art. Go play the stock market.’”

Next, Arison steers us toward Salon 94. She had lunch the day before with owner Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and artist Karon Davis, who was showing a striking life-size plaster sculpture of three young Black girls playing double dutch with the New York gallery at the fair. Over the meal, the three had hatched a plan to collaborate on Davis’s forthcoming body of work, “Black Ballerina,” inspired by her mother and sister’s experiences as African American women and girls in the world of ballet.



Karon Davis, *Double Dutch Girls* (2021) from Salon 94, New York, at Art Basel Miami Beach. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

Arison is the president of the American Ballet Theater, and was committed to having the organization support the project. (If Arison’s laundry list of posts already seems impressive, know that she is also the chair of the education committee at the Brooklyn Museum, a board member at [Americans for the Arts](#), and a trustee at institutions including MoMA and Lincoln Center in New York.)

By this point, we had lost Buckman and Jigarjian, but were joined by [former Hauser and Wirth Los Angeles partner](#) Graham Steele, who was enjoying his first Miami Art Week free of the pressures of art dealing.

“I was joking with Jeanne that I’d take all the Kennedy Yankos,” he told Artnet News. “Now that I’m on the other side, I get to taunt people.”

From Salon 94, we headed to Jessica Silverman, where the San Francisco dealer showed off gemlike paintings from Claire Rojas and handed out bottles of water—ample hydration being key in surviving a hectic art fair preview.

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Our tour began to pick up speed, the galleries blurring together as we headed to Nova, where Arison was excited that the fair was accepting, for the first time, galleries that hadn't been in business for five years yet—and even some dealers who don't have physical spaces.

Arison's list included a few Los Angeles galleries, such as Various Small Fires and David Kordansky, who expressed the most trepidation about the return to art fairs of anyone I spoke to all day.

"For me this is intense," he said. "It's like a little irresponsible in some way—don't you feel like we're being naughty or playing Russian roulette or something?"

Arison admitted that the rise of the virus's new variant had prompted YoungArts to move their planned events for the week outdoors. But there were also silver linings—after nearly two years without the full international art fair circuit, the work on view felt fresher, she argued.

"Before, it would be like this is the stuff that didn't make it at Frieze London and got recycled for Art Basel Miami Beach," she said.

Arison continued checking galleries off her list, before reuniting with Buckman and Jigarjian at London's Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, which had Buckman's latest textile-covered boxing glove sculpture. She and Arison posed together for a picture, but Buckman didn't want to linger, worried that she might overhear a fairgoer making disparaging remarks about the piece. It was time, she told us, for her to hit the beach.



Sarah Arison and Kate Fowle admire a painting by Jose Parla from Palm Beach's Ben Brown at Art Basel Miami Beach. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

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Our whirlwind tour ended as it began, with Hank Willis Thomas, who was showing another quilted work with Ben Brown from Palm Beach. But Arison was also here to take a look at a painting from another artist For Freedoms, the painter Jose Parla. He spent three months in a coma earlier this year after falling ill last year.

Before we parted ways, we stopped at the collector lounge for a champagne toast. As Arison went to pull out her credit card to pay for a few glasses of Ruinart, she was smoothly intercepted by Kim, the head of VIP, who insisted on covering the cost.

"This is why I work here," she joked. "It's on Art Basel."

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