

All the fun of the art fair*

by Rob Bound, *Monocle*, December 5, 2009

Rob Bound's column on Art Basel Miami Beach features a review of O'Grady's show and quotes by the artist, called by the British author a *rara avis*, by whom he is disconcerted.

MIAMI. When is a trade fair not a trade fair? When it's an art fair, that's when. The Miami Beach Convention Centre is home to such august annual jamborees as the Professional Convention Management Association and the International Association for Exposition Management. Nobody in the world, except the organisers of these high points of gala boredom, knows what these are; all we can guess is that walkie talkie impresarios, clipboard contractors and signage magnates make a mint. But when it's not hosting those celebrations of beige, it's where slinky old Art Basel pitches its toothsome tent in the winter sunshine. It's when the people on the stands love what they do, know what they're selling, quote critics and dig critical discourse.

And this year, after woes and readjustments and The Crunch, gallerists doing Art Basel Miami Beach really want to be here, are glad to have had the opportunity to hang their paintings, press their suits, huff-on and polish their slightly less rose-tinted specs.

"It's still hugely competitive to get into the fair," says Alexander Gray, the Alexander Gray of Alexander Gray Associates, a three year-old Manhattan gallery with a fast-earned reputation for the curatorial, contextual and art historical over the commercially insatiable. "While the blue chips are reaffirming their relationships with big collectors, this is really important for the business models of the smaller galleries."

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Gray has hung one artist, Lorraine O'Grady, who shares her dealer's three adjectives but has a fourth even trickier one: O'Grady's famously non-prolific. She is showing *Art Is...*, a photographic reproduction of her performative intervention at Harlem's African-American Day Parade in 1983 in which O'Grady and her pals literally framed the event in gilt rectangles, capturing faces, places, moods and moments in a beguilingly natural way. O'Grady's work in Gray's booth is a show, not just a selection of greatest hits that might shift him some cash in the short term. As the artist herself, a rare bird at convention centres – art fairs or otherwise – says, "There are ways of meaning success that aren't commercial, sometimes not art critical; just satisfying."

George Vamvakidis of Athens gallery The Breeder is showing one artist, too; Marc Bijl is a Dutchman in a dark mood and The Breeder has let him paint its white cube black. Vamvakidis wants to make a "schism", as he calls it, in the fair. Like Gray, Vamvakidis is a first-timer at the main event, but with an aggressively other ambition; "We're not playing curators," says the nautically bearded Athenian. "It would be pretentious to say that. I want people to go, 'what the fuck is it? I want to buy it!'" And buyers have been busy around Bijl's blackness, they say.

Richard Ingleby is of the Alexander Gray school of gallery-naming. Edinburgh's Ingleby Gallery is a first-timer in the main marquee, too, exhibiting works by Peter Liversidge and Richard Forster and "playing the long game with two artists who aren't known in the States". It's a tough gig, but tough times can be good for unknowns, just as they are for Richter and Johns and Koons – especially if they possess the charm, craft and accessible imaginations of Ingleby's young charges.

Liversidge is showing his *Proposals*; a book-cum-framed-manifesto for things he'd like to do – some of which get made, others of which languish tantalisingly on naïve, typewritten pages. To paraphrase the artist, "I propose to walk down the highways of Miami and collect all the bits of metal that have fallen off cars and melt them into a giant sphere." This is the sort of work that exists in the imagination as much as ever it might if Dade County or Richard Ingleby ever commissioned him to

sweep the streets with a bunsen burner. It's also some of the strongest stuff here, at Art Basel Miami Beach, in the convention centre where the photocopier salesmen with the cheap cologne chat up secretaries every other week of the year.

When is a trade fair not a trade fair? When a 74-year-old black American feminist artist named Lorraine O'Grady leans across a coffee table and says, "It's weird that profundity be perceived in a place like this."

Rob Bound is Monocle's culture editor. Art Basel Miami Beach runs until 6 December 2009.