Shaking Up Miami

Thom Collins has moved the Pérez Art Museum Miami into an acclaimed new building, where green terraces mingle with galleries full of art for the global age

BY ELISA TURNER

When the Pérez Art Museum Miami opened its doors last December, architecture critics praised the 200,000-square-foot structure as “dazzling,” “seductive,” “inviting,” and “outside the white box.” Perched on a hurricane-resistant platform on the edge of Biscayne Bay, the Herzog & de Meuron–designed building has a wraparound porch covered by a giant canopy that was inspired by Miami’s Stiltsville, a cluster of mostly 1930s-era houses built above the water. Vertical gardens designed by Patrick Blanc hang the length of PAMM’s three stories, tall windows provide sweeping views of the bay, and the grand staircase does double duty as an auditorium.

Its innovative green design is just one part of a $220 million relaunch of the museum spearheaded by director Thom Collins. A slim man who walks among museum groups with quick, restless steps, Collins discusses plans for PAMM with infectious energy. His goal is to create a 21st-century cultural hotspot for Miami by bringing in exhibitions of work by acclaimed international artists such as Ai Weiwei and Shahzia Sikander, as well as shows that reflect the Caribbean and Latin American backgrounds of many residents and new arrivals. Collins wants people to use the museum’s indoor and outdoor spaces as a town square, and he’s starting educational initiatives geared toward tech-savvy millennials.

“We are creating a model of museum practice that’s very progressive, certainly in the constellation of North American arts institutions,” he says. “This is a city that’s all about the new, the now, the next.”

There have been bumps along the way. After the real-estate developer and Latin American art collector Jorge M. Pérez promised to donate $40 million in cash and artwork to the capital campaign, controversy erupted over renaming the institution—known as the Miami Art Museum at its previous location—for Pérez. Four board members resigned in protest. But Collins took it all in stride. “The name change was misrepresented to the public,” he says.

As Collins speaks, cruise ships are sometimes visible from his third-floor corner office. He wears an elegant white shirt with black pants by his favorite designer, Martin Margiela. While his primary residence is in Miami’s Design District, he also shares a New York City apartment with his partner, Matthew Goodrich, director of design for the firm AvroKO. They met about 17 years ago at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, where Collins was a Newhall Curatorial Fellow.

A native of suburban Philadelphia, Collins, now 45, fondly recalls visits with his family to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. His father, a history teacher, would explain the social and historical context of the pieces on display. Collins especially liked the museum’s collection of Duchamps. “Even as a child, I gravitated toward this more conceptual work. I remember the Large Glass very vividly,” he says.

Not long after earning his master’s degree in art history from Northwestern University, Collins started on a museum career. He has now worked as a director and curator for more than 15 years. While chief curator at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, he organized the expansive group show...
“Somewhere Better Than This Place: Alternative Social Experience in the Spaces of Contemporary Art” to inaugurate a new building by Zaha Hadid. Collins then directed Purchase College’s Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York, for five years before arriving at MAM in 2010. A Neuberger exhibition showcasing the performance art of Cuban-born Tania Bruguera, he says, a good introduction to certain “key dynamics” of Miami, where many Cuban exiles reside. Bruguera, Collins notes, presented “art in Cuba that was very critical of the regime and very subversive.”

“To understand Miami is to understand this place as ‘the biggest small town in America.’ Thom Collins gets that as well as any newcomer I’ve seen in Miami in this past quarter-century,” says David Lawrence Jr., the retired publisher of the Miami Herald, former MAM chair, and honorary trustee of PAMM. “He’s knowledgeable, never a show-off, likes to be with people—and actively seeks them out.”

Educational initiatives suited to the digital age play a prominent role in PAMM’s programming. The current show “Image Search: Photography from the Collection” (up through July 27) encourages visitors to use iPads to explore the visual and historical connections among the photographs on view (by Edward Steichen, Weegee, Andy Warhol, Tina Barney, and others), underscoring how images circulate on the Internet.

“In a way, a museum is kind of a three-dimensional hypertext,” Collins says, adding that he’d like visitors to store images of favorite artworks on their smartphones while watching a video of a curator or artist speaking about the work. The museum has facilities to produce these videos while an exhibition is being installed, and PAMM now trains teenagers from a cross section of Miami to prepare audio and video tours for other teens. “So instead of trying to imagine what a 16-year-old wants to know about Louise Bourgeois, for example, we can actually engage them in a process of investigating and then producing content to help mediate the experience of Louise Bourgeois for their peers,” Collins explains.

Under his leadership, the new PAMM is focusing on Miami’s ties to Latin America and the Caribbean. “We want our diverse audiences to see themselves in what we do here,” Collins says. The traveling exhibition “Caribbean: Crossroads of the World” (on view through August 17) has a section on Miami’s Caribbean community that was created especially for PAMM. The show examines the region’s history and diaspora through more than two centuries of work dating from just after the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) to the present, including paintings, sculptures, photographs, videos, and performances. Up through August 31 is “Edouard Duval-Carrié: Imagined Landscapes,” which presents new paintings by the Miami-based Duval-Carrié, known for his distinctive storybook take on the spiritual and historical iconography of Haiti. Then there’s “Beatriz Milhazes: Jardim Botânico” (opening September 19), the first major U.S. retrospective of this Brazilian artist’s colorfully abstract paintings and collages that meld traditional Brazilian patterns with Western modernism. And the ongoing series “AMERICANA” explores thematic links between big-name international artists and lesser-known luminaries from throughout the Americas.

“This is a city that is growing and looks like what a number of major cities in the United States will look like in terms of demographics in the next 25-plus years,” says Collins. “Miami is the future, and the future is now.”

Elisa Turner is the Miami correspondent for ARTnews.