A decade ago, Miami was considered a tropical beach paradise but hardly an international arts oasis. In fact, after the violent Miami Vice-style scenes of the 1980s and 90s, followed by the Elián González fiasco and the Flori-duh images of the presidential vote recount in 2000, the Magic City was better known, fairly or not, as a cultural wasteland whose most exalted aesthetic expression was plastic surgery.

What a difference ten years have made — thanks in no small part to Art Basel Miami Beach, which has grown from an offshoot of the eminent Art Basel in Switzerland to become in its own right one of the world’s most famous art fairs, certainly the most popular in the Americas. This year’s show, the 10th edition, which runs from Thursday, Dec. 1, through the weekend, features contemporary works by more than 2,000 artists offered from some 265 major galleries representing five continents, as well as an array of events, satellite fairs extending from Miami Beach to vibrant new Miami art districts like Wynwood, and of course the jet-set parties roaring up and down the Art Deco corridors of Ocean Drive and Collins Avenue. “There’s no question that this is now the foremost art fair in the U.S.,” says Miami billionaire and art collector extraordinaire Norman Braman, who helped bring Art Basel to Florida.

Braman was among a group of prominent Miamians who decided in the 2000s to change the city’s philistine reputation. Art Basel directors, whose annual June fair had become arguably the world’s most important contemporary art event since its founding in 1970, wanted to establish a North American franchise, to be held in December. They naturally sought a warm-climate site, and Miami, a winter retreat for so many European art collectors, seemed logical – but, they discovered, not only for its balmy temperatures. “I don’t think Basel would have come in the end if they hadn’t also seen that Miami is actually one of the most cosmopolitan and multicultural cities in the U.S.,” says Carol Damian, director of the Frost Art Museum at Miami’s Florida International University. “For an international art fair to locate here made a lot of sense.”

That’s also because “the art germ was here,” Damian adds, in the form of a fledgling but energetic art community setting up shop in quarters like the once depressed Wynwood neighborhood, just north of downtown Miami, and the nearby Design District. “A lot of us were tired of having our city thought of as a wild west of drugs and guns and corruption,” says Damian. “So we’d started to create our own cultural environment here, and I think when Art Basel came they saw the potential.” And, she notes, Miami’s sense of the offbeat, for better or worse: “A contemporary art scene needs to back away from the status quo, and Miami was never status quo.”
The first Art Basel Miami Beach, slated for 2001, was cancelled in the wake of 9/11. But in subsequent years the event caught traction unusually fast, drawing such leading international galleries as Waddington of London and Acquavella of New York – which last year sold Richard Diebenkorn’s painting “Man Drawing” for $5 million. In 2010 the fair drew 46,000 visitors (Art Basel had 62,000) and racked up sales revenues in the tens of millions of dollars, numbers that promise to rise again this year. The 2011 edition, anchored as always at the Miami Beach Convention Center, will also feature exhibitions and performances for the first time in Collins Park and project large-scale art video on the wall of the recently completed, Frank Gehry-designed New World Center.

Art Basel Miami Beach fans also say it’s more spontaneous and democratic than more regimented European fairs like Art Basel and Venice Biennale. The number of satellite and “guerrilla” arts fairs scheduled to run in Miami alongside Art Basel Miami Beach, including American Exuberance and Graffiti Gone Global, tends to make for a more fun if not richer experience. So does the fair’s far deeper Latin American influence – especially, this year, Brazilian artists – and the growing number of high-rolling Latin American art collectors, flush with cash from the region’s current economic boom.

Braman, in fact, notes that the fair has persuaded many international art collectors not just to vacation in South Florida but to buy second homes there as well. “We have an art community here now that can rival places like SoHo in New York City,” Braman argues, “and that community has opened itself up to the world in ways others simply haven’t. That’s one of the big keys to this fair’s success.”

And that success has helped fuel Miami’s cultural momentum. Aside from the New World Center, which the New York Times has called a potential “game-changer in classical music,” the city recently opened the Arsht Center, the nation’s second-largest performing arts complex after New York’s Lincoln Center, and will soon cut ribbons for two major cultural hubs, the Miami Art Museum and Miami Science Museum, both near picturesque Biscayne Bay. Most important for collectors, a metropolis that had only a handful of real art galleries a decade ago boasts scores of them today. America’s tropical paradise is making a serious bid to become an international arts Eden as well – and much of it is because Basel found the Beach.