

New Wave Art Wknd Bridges the Empathy Gap

By Jacobia Urist | November 29, 2019



Sarah Gavlak by Weston Wells

For much of the world, Miami’s annual December art week is all about South Beach, Art Basel and the growing constellation of satellite fairs. Of course, for many, it’s also all about A-list parties and the reason for the season—buying art. And make no mistake about it: Sarah Gavlak, with an eponymous gallery in Palm Beach and Los Angeles whose roster includes such feminist icons as Betty Tompkins and Marilyn Minter, is certainly a proponent of selling art. But two years ago, the seeds of something quite different caught hold in her imagination.

As the founder of New Wave Art Wknd, now in its second edition, Gavlak has established a palate cleanser of sorts— a noncommercial collector event to bookend the Art Basel festivities (last year’s iteration preceded art week, while this year’s follows the fair’s VIP events due to Thanksgiving). “Miami is amazing and the energy for the week is incredible. Everyone is running around to parties and making sure they get to the fair. This is the opposite,” she says with a slight laugh. “It’s very mellow.”

Inspired in parts by Aspen’s ArtCrush and Berlin Art Week, the occasion is a much more intimate affair than its Miami counterpart and it’s nothing if not a serious endeavor. In 2018, Gavlak set a high bar: not only to organize a series of private collection tours (fashion legend Lisa Perry’s oceanfront home hit legendary status among insiders on Instagram), but also productive discussions with international thought leaders around a critical, socially-driven theme. Last year’s inaugural focus, for example, was diversity and inclusivity—and in Palm Beach no less, not exactly a progressive dot on America’s cultural geography. “Unfortunately, when people hear Palm Beach, they think Mar-a-Lago,” Gavlak explains. “But it’s more than that. There are incredible philanthropists here who don’t just give to art causes and museums.” Which is not to say that there isn’t a significant dose of conspicuous glamour, with lead sponsors like Phillips, Oscar de la Renta and Rolls Royce helping to cover event costs.

But in a short time, Gavlak may already have nudged the general perception of Palm Beach's potential as a creative haven. The topic for 2019 is immigration and migration; ticket proceeds go to two ambitious immigrant-directed nonprofits. To wit, New Wave Art Wknd has partnered with Pittsburgh's City of Asylum, an organization that undertakes a wide range of open-ended assistance efforts for exiled writers (and their families) under threat of persecution, from rent-free furnished homes and living stipends to medical benefits, so that these individuals can continue to write throughout their journey to financial stability.

In addition, this year's public programming features artists Saya Woolfalk, Jeppe Hein and Renzo Ortega, the first participant in New Wave Art Wknd's residency: a program dedicated to immigrant artists that provides a live-work studio space in West Palm Beach for six weeks during the upcoming summer. Ortega's practice probes immigrants' countless contributions to America's cultural fabric and his own experiences fleeing government forces in Peru to come to the United States, where he lived as an undocumented resident before eventually becoming a naturalized citizen in 2013.

"There's a lot of rhetoric against immigrants right now. It's about fear of the other," Gavlak says, adding that art collectors, undoubtedly, are far from immune to conservative social mores and anti-immigration sentiment. But she believes in the power of art to bridge that empathy gap and help overcome "other-ing." "On our New Wave Instagram, I had this idea of posting well-known artists who were also immigrants. People know Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky, immigrants who became some of the most important, incredible modern painters," Gavlak says. "These are artists who had to flee genocide or emigrated for a host of reasons. It's not new for artists to be facing these sorts of challenges."