

Behind the Scenes of New Wave Art Wknd, an Exclusive Palm Beach Art Extravaganza

Well-heeled art lovers open their homes and collections for the philanthropic weekend.

By Lauren Goodman | December 19, 2019



Sarah Gavlak, founder of New Wave Art Wknd, in a Rolls-Royce. The car company was one of the weekend's sponsors. Photographed by Douglas Friedman

When you think of Palm Beach, boundary-pushing art isn't always the first thing that comes to mind. The sliver of a Floridian island with pristine white beaches and turquoise waters is synonymous with old money, Gilded Age mansions, and their associated interiors. (Read: pastels, rattan, and lots of embroidered pillows.)

But, years ago, when gallerist Sarah Gavlak was working at New York's Gagosian Gallery, she "saw that an enormous amount of contemporary art was coming here," she tells AD PRO. The observation spurred Gavlak to open her own namesake gallery on the island—then the first such art destination of its kind in Palm Beach. While Gavlak debuted pioneering solo shows by female artists such as Marilyn Minter and Sheila Hicks, other parts of Palm Beach society continued to feel less, well, contemporary.

Which brings us to the event that is New Wave Art Wknd: a multiday extravaganza, and Gavlak's brainchild, which wrapped its second iteration earlier this month. Invitation-only, noncommercial, and therefore somewhat antidotal to Art Basel Miami, the proceedings served as a palate cleanser for a small group of art-world sophisticates.

The weekend, otherwise referred to as NAWW, is also how Gavlak and her power-packed advisory committee—which includes the likes of Jane Holzer, Sanford Biggers, and more—showcase the flourishing contemporary art scene in Palm Beach while focusing on its blind spots. "Palm Beach has great collectors but there aren't artists [living] here," Gavlak explains. "This is about getting artists a seat at the table.... There is so much philanthropy—but not that much diversity."

During this month's NAWW, which focused on immigration and migration, art scholar Isolde Brielmaier moderated high-level conversations between philanthropists, artists, curators, and museum directors such as Thelma Golden. The topics ranged from art as a means for political and social intervention to diversity and inclusion within institutions.

“Just beyond the border of Palm Beach, which is almost 96% white, there is a diverse immigrant community that is sorely underrepresented,” Gavlak adds. “By bringing artists from around the world to this region, we can jump-start a cultural conversation with collectors who have the financial ability to create real change.”

NWAW partnered with City of Asylum, a nonprofit based in Pittsburgh that provides sanctuary and legal support to writers who are exiled from their home countries under threat of persecution, torture, or in some cases, death. Peruvian artist Renzo Ortega, an attendee of the weekend, will be the first in a joint artist-in-residence program that is set to kick off in July. When asked what he likes about Palm Beach, Ortega smiled and said, “The colors. The blues are different. Maybe my work here will be about blues.” All proceeds from the event benefited the residency program and the City of Asylum.

Overall, the weekend ranged from public-art experiences to more intimate events. A visit to a literally splashy display—Danish artist Jeppe Hein’s fountain at Rosemary Square—is one example of the former. As for private access for collectors and their collections, NWAW served up a full menu. Beth DeWoody hosted a breakfast at her own private museum, the Bunker, where she debuted her third annual show. Yvonne Force Villareal, another NWAW advisory committee member, found the exhibition to be “amazing.” Later on, the weekend’s sponsor, Maison Ullens, hosted a poolside lunch at the 1920s Spanish-style home of collectors Irene and James Karp.

On the Saturday night of the itinerary, dinner was hosted at the brand-new, jaw-dropping home of collectors Amy and John Phelan. Palm Beach neighbors Lisa and Richard Perry (who are also on the NWAW’s advisory committee) marveled at the proportions of the home as they sat for dinner *al fresco* around the illuminated pool. Super collector Mike De Paola remarked admiringly of the Phelans’ home, “They have the two best Raqib Shaws I’ve ever seen.” But it was the Marilyn Minter paintings, for which the hostess served as a model, that arguably stole the show.

The next morning, the troupe of art lovers made their way to Lisa Perry’s book signing at Assouline, and then onto a lunch for the designer’s latest enterprise: Lisa Perry Home (which is, quite literally, an actual home). “I realized I love doing homes. I can’t do any more myself, so I said, Maybe I’ll just start to do it for others. Without their input!” Everything in the Robert Gottfried Regency-style house—from the Vladimir Kagan sofa to the enormous Robert Indiana artwork—are all included with the price tag. “Someone asked me how much the Love Carpet is,” Perry said, referring to yet another attention-grabbing inclusion. “I am not going to tell them! If they want it, they have to buy the house.”

After another meal and a couple more collection tours, everyone hugged warmly to say goodbye. Cultural strategist Bettina Prentice, who co produced NWAW with Gavlak, later reflected, “No one sows the seeds of empathy more effectively than artists do. And nothing draws a crowd like opening the doors of spectacular private collections. Sarah combined those two ideas beautifully, while managing to open hearts, minds, and checkbooks.”



Left to right: A Claes Oldenburg sculpture at the Norton Museum, another stop along the weekend's way; Yvonne Force Villareal of Culture Corps (a collaborator on the weekend) at the Bunker with her borrowed whip, from Rolls-Royce; The first project by Lisa Perry Home. Every piece of furniture, art, and even clothing in the abode are included with the cost of purchase; photographed by Douglas Friedman



A corner of the new home of mega collectors Amy and John Phelan is covered in Versace pillows; Bettina Prentice, coproducer of New Wave Art Wknd, wearing Maison Ullens in the garden of a major collector and philanthropist's home that was opened for NAW invitees; photographed by Douglas Friedman



A private collector's home in Palm Beach; Danish artist Jeppe Hein celebrates the opening of his first permanent fountain in the U.S. at Rosemary Square in West Palm Beach; photographed by Douglas Friedman