



The Art World Arrives in Palm Beach as Mar-a-Lago's Noisy Neighbors

By Fan Zhong | December 4, 2018



Beth Rudin DeWoody, Sarah Gavlak, and Amy Phelan; photo by BFA

Life in Palm Beach, Florida can be totally frictionless. A day can glide happily along like a Lilly Pulitzer dress or a Maybach car or a long lunch, all of which are probably more plentiful here on a per capita basis than any other place in America. In Palm Beach, where the median income is upwards of a quarter million dollars (don't miss the vintage shopping!), leisure is a profession. Even the palm trees are re-engineered just so to enhance the ocean views they frame, as are the residents' already well-kept bodies. But then Donald Trump comes to town, to his beloved Mar-a-Lago, and traffic gets stuck and supper parties suddenly get uncomfortable.

Or—maybe, too—when the art world arrives.

"Art worlds," clarified the curator Isolde Brielmaier. "The plural is correct," affirmed the art producer and curator Yvonne Force Villareal. They were joined by three equally strong-willed and diverse women and men—the artists Diana al-Hadid, Gisela Colon, and Sanford Biggers—this past Saturday morning at an outdoor pavilion at the Royal Poinciana Plaza in West Palm Beach, for a panel about inclusion in the art world. As a parade of yoga pants strode by in the background on their way to the Hermès store, talk turned to the great plague of our time—that we all live in our bubbles—and things got a little colorful at the first panel of what has been branded as the New Wave Art Wknd.

"Most Americans don't see themselves represented in the art world," said al-Hadid, who was born in Syria but for a lot of her life simply thought of herself as Ohioan. "So they don't engage."

Engagement (and discussion, and perhaps argument, and god forbid maybe even perspective-broadening) was the goal of Sarah Gavlak, who has a contemporary art gallery among many in Los Angeles but whose latest space, which we were seated in front of, is a lone beacon in Palm Beach. Although the gallery at Royal Poinciana is brand new, she has been in Palm Beach for over a decade, bringing new women and immigrant artists (she's starting an artist residency program for immigrants here), among others, to a community that for the most part only knew the blue-chip names that fit in nicely with the décor. New Wave was Gavlak's idea—she'd conceived it as something like a Berlin Art Weekend or Aspen's ArtCrush—although she will be the first to admit nothing would have come of a smart notion without the right backers.

Last December, when Gavlak threw a looser, unbranded trial version of the art weekend right before the Art Basel Miami behemoth, she convinced the ur-collector Beth Rudin DeWoody to move the grand opening of the Bunker Art Space, a solid Art Deco block in West Palm Beach that showcases her peripatetic and relentless collecting, up three months to anchor the weekend. This year, DeWoody had another opening, revealing a collection that was described to me as egoless—ironic, maybe, for a private museum, but which seemed about right. Rooms with major works by everyone from George Condo to Betty Tompkins were curated by theme or sometimes just a fun idea: a Silver Room, chock full of mirrored and shiny objects by the likes of Sylvie Fleury and Hank Willis Thomas, or the "Tales From the Crate Room," which was basically DeWoody letting the artist E.V. Day have the run of her works in storage, and then opening the closet to VIPs, shipping crates and all. It was about as close as a museum could get to DeWoody throwing wide the doors to her home—which she had in fact done the previous night. The supper party, which took place beneath the moon on DeWoody's expansive oceanside lawn after a lavish opening at Gavlak's gallery, was a reminder that on Palm Beach, a social occasion, even one sponsored by Christie's with champagne provided by Jay-Z's Armand de Brignac, is maybe the best way of getting things done.

"We have a lot of doers and shakers here," Villareal had said at the first panel of the weekend.

She didn't specify women, but to my eye it was the women who ran Palm Beach. Villareal herself had managed to transform a former Macy's in a ho-hum shopping mall in West Palm whose greatest draw is probably its *Downton Abbey* exhibition (to be fair, probably a blockbuster) into Culture Lab, an "experiential arts center" that dares to deliver you, say, sound art on the way to the Cheesecake Factory. Ann Tenenbaum, who sits on the board of the Met and too many other institutions to list here, was there to jump in on a panel on women in the art world that got especially lively when Cheryl Brutvan, the curator of contemporary at the Norton Museum in West Palm, mentioned the fact that women artists mentored by women gallerists who had reached the top had nowhere to turn to but to male megadealers like Larry Gagosian or Hauser & Wirth.

"Paula Cooper!" someone shouted from the back of the room. Justice for Paula Cooper, indeed, but as Brutvan clarified, even she didn't operate at the very, very top of the market, where there was only room for empire-builders.

And sitting in the audience right there in the front row was the influential collector and designer Lisa Perry, who is also part of New Wave's advisory board and allowed us in for an impromptu tour of her house on the beach. It's within spitting distance of Mar-a-Lago (I mean that in the most literal way possible), and is an absolute miracle of light and her superhuman eye (she is in fact starting a business flipping houses, and I mean that in the most sophisticated way possible). It is actually her daughter, Samantha Perry David, who is the developer behind the Royal Poinciana Plaza where Gavlak's new gallery is. It all goes very much to Villareal's original point—that New Wave's audience has the resources to actually do things.

It certainly does seem that all the elements are place in the Palm Beach for expansion as an art world destination: money, powerful collectors, local institutions, artists soon to arrive, an entrenched conservatism to disrupt. And, it would seem, the women behind the scenes to make sure that it doesn't simply become a Art Basel Miami extension event dominated by parties and talk of the market.

"I do not want it to be that," Gavlak said firmly. "I want it to be about artists, and the conversations we need to have."



Photo by Jessica Klewicki Glynn; Inside The Bunker Art Space



From left to right: Inside the Palm Beach home of Beth Rudin DeWoody, photo by Jessica Klewicki Glynn; Installation view of The Culture Lab, photo courtesy of Culture Lab and artist