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Brokers Get Creative To Market Properties To Art Basel Crowd

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Inside the brightly lighted tents that set the stage for one of the world's most important art fairs, a dizzying lineup of artists, dealers and gallery owners tantalized affluent art lovers this week with the chance to purchase one-of-a-kind aesthetic experiences.

Under the southernmost tent, a gallery representative offered a man the opportunity to drop a cool \$55,000 on the performance art prints of a Chinese contemporary artist, whose work involves painting over his clothes and seemingly disappearing into various urban backgrounds.

A few turns from the main entrance, a man with a thick French accent discussed the possibility of buying a psychedelic collage resembling Edvard Munch's famous "Scream" painting which, upon closer inspection, was made up of a hundred tiny "Mona Lisa" replicas.

Near the back of the show, an Argentinean couple marveled at a sculpture of a whimsical library that played a powerful visual illusion on the observer, wondering if it would be too intense a parlor trick for dinner guests back home.

From his booth just off the entrance, Ron Shuffield offered art lovers his version of a unique aesthetic experience, namely the opportunity to wake up daily inside their very own moated castle.

Shuffield is not an art world entrepreneur but the chief executive of Coral Gables-based EWM Realty International, a real estate broker whose clients hail almost exclusively from the global top half-percent. But that's not stopping him from making his best impression of a fine arts dealer as he courts multimillionaires in the market for a Lichtenstein or a Banksy to consider scooping up that castle in Homestead, a ski home in Aspen or an expansive retreat on the Mediterranean coast.

"These luxury properties in a way can be compared to collectibles like art or jewelry that have been collected throughout the ages," said Shuffield, whose company is affiliated with art house Christie's. "They're so unique. If you have one, no one else can have it."

Past meetings arranged with Art Basel visitors have resulted in transactions for homes in St. Barthélemy, according to Shuffield. Meanwhile, Alicia Cervera Lamadrid, a broker for her eponymous firm in Miami, recalls a time a client who scooped up both a painting and real estate while attending an exhibit at Bal Harbour's St. Regis condo-hotel.

"A gentleman who attended bought not just a painting but an apartment to hang it inside," she said.

GLOBAL PORTFOLIO

Shuffield is not alone in his pitch. As they have done every year since 1979 when a group of Miami gallery owners began a small fair that has since grown into a weeklong juggernaut of art fairs, parties and shopping colloquially known as Art Basel, real estate brokers to the rich have used the influx of affluence to cut deals and seal relationships.

Yet in the middle of a luxury housing boom that has flooded the market, brokers and developers are upping the wow factor, looking for new ways to put their offerings in front of potential clients.

EWM, for example, is modifying its longstanding approach to showing properties at the Art Miami fair, where its main booth is located. Rather relying solely on agents specializing in specific markets having one-on-one conversations with prospective buyers, the booth features electronic touchscreens showcasing 200 ultra-luxury properties in the company's global portfolio.

Shuffield said the change was made after some noticing prospective buyers last year were more interested in understanding the breadth of what his company could offer rather than looking at specific listings.

Competitor ONE Sotheby's International Realty is taking clients on "private curated tours" of a different art fair, Scope Miami Beach, hoping to entice at least some of them into tours of properties under development that the company is marketing, including the Ritz-Carlton Residences and Beach House 8 a few blocks away.

"We have a big auction-house client base, which makes it work," said Mayi de la Vega, chief executive of ONE Sotheby's. "We know people who collect art or watches or rare wines also collect homes."

SPEC OFFERING

Tapping that client base is only one of the elements required to making broker's efforts during Art Basel work—as important as positioning their property offerings to match the psychological tone of the week, de la Vega and others noted.

"There's a synergy because at these fairs you have the clients themselves, you have their art dealers, and it's an opportunity to share a vision," said Susan de Franca, chief executive of the development

marketing unit for Douglas Elliman Real Estate. "Even if their buyers don't buy, you have their dealers and maybe interior designers who can be engaged."

"This is not a new concept, infusing art with real estate," she added. But what was novel this year is the "growth upon the branding," de França said, the explicit linking of particular properties to the art world festivities and their positioning as collectible artifacts to consider in their own right.

That's what Elliman was doing Thursday at a VIP Collector's Lounge inside the most popular of the week's fairs, Art Basel, where the company is presenting about 20 properties as pieces of art. The properties include Miami Beach's Faena House at 3201 Collins Ave., where early sales are rumored to have garnered a stunning \$3,000 per square foot.

A few miles away from the fairs in the gated Miami Beach community of Sunset Islands, Bart Reines has created a spec house that he calls "the ultimate Art Basel home." Reines, who designs and build homes in Miami, said the 10,317-square-foot home was conceived to be showcased and sold during the week of fairs.

Reines teamed up with Elle Décor magazine, which put together a team of nine interior designers, and dropped what Reines estimates as \$1 million in furniture and art into the property. At a party Tuesday evening, Reines showed off the home to about 600 people, most in the art and design world.

"This is a frame within a frame," Reines said Wednesday as he sat in the home's expansive lofted living room, pointing out the surface area considerations to make sure walls were suitable for hanging art. The Picassos could come sooner rather than later: Reines said a deal being negotiated coming into the week solidified Tuesday, and the house is expected to sell for \$15.5 million to a New York buyer.

EDGEWATER LIGHTS

The rush to tap interest from the visiting art lovers extends beyond putting new and development-stage properties in front of potential buyers. In Miami's Edgewater neighborhood, four competing developers are teaming up to promote buildings that don't exist yet.

"How do you get heard in the midst of so much noise and so much music when you're competing with enormous events and enormous budgets?" Cervera asked rhetorically.

Her answer: working with developers—including local heavyweights Melo Group and Related Group—to create a light show in Edgewater visible from visitors' hotels in Miami Beach. The searchlights draw attention to a few projects under development, Cervera said. More importantly, she hopes they can start a conversation about possibilities for yet-to-be-announced construction in a part of Miami she described as "overlooked during the last boom."

"We all remember during the downturn when buildings were completed but remained dark because they couldn't find tenants and how happy everyone was when they finally lit up," Cervera said. "Here we are with even more light."