

The Miami Gang of Four

By Elizabeth Fasolino

(7/15/2008) What do a group of high school buddies and former college roommates, now in their early 30s, do when they get together for a reunion weekend on the East End? Maybe they surf the swell brought by Hurricane Bertha, chat up a girl or two at Cyril's, or shoot a few games of pool at Wolfie's.

But, if they're Tao Rey, Bhakti Baxter, Daniel Arsham, and Martin Oppel, artists from Miami, they also mount a group show at the Fireplace Project in Springs, called, fittingly, "Reunion," and celebrate with dinner and drinks at the Surf Lodge, Montauk's latest hot spot, with a few dozen friends.

In 2000, before the arrival of Art Basel Miami and the revitalization of South Beach, the four young artists lived together and worked side by side in a Depression-era stucco rental in the Edgewater section of Miami, where they eventually created an alternative exhibit space. Known simply as the House, it quickly acquired a reputation for iconoclastic creativity and became a regular stop on the V.I.P. tour of the city's most vibrant art enclaves by Bonnie Clearwater, the director of the Miami Museum of Contemporary Art.

The artists grew up together in Miami, attending the Design and Architecture Senior High School, a magnet public school program founded in 1990. They all went on to the New World School of Art, a high school and college program founded in 1987, except for Mr. Arsham (coincidentally, the only member of the group not of Argentine descent), who went to Cooper Union in New York City.

The House, which was razed for a condominium project in 2006, was adjacent to the 1929 Art Deco Sears building that was being incorporated into the Carnival Center for the Performing Arts. For an early show they appropriated the Sears neon sign into an installation. Over the years each has gone on to individual success, with three represented by the Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin of Paris and Miami.

Last week, the artists installed the show, which was first conceived last Christmas, with the help of Edsel Williams, who owns the gallery, and the support of Jim Chanos, a collector of their work for more than eight years, who has a house in East Hampton.

Mr. Chanos, the founder of Kynikos Associates, an investment company, has been collecting work by contemporary artists for more than 15 years. He was introduced to the artists at the House by Mr. Williams in late 2000, and he has been collecting their work ever since.



Morgan McGivern

Bhakti Baxter, Tao Rey, Daniel Arsham, and Martin Oppel, from left, in front of Mr. Baxter's series "Untitled (Electron Cloud 3, 4, 5, and 6)" at the Fireplace Project in Springs

He has collected more than 20 pieces by the "Domino" artists



Courtesy of the Fireplace Project

“Light Matters” by Martin Oppel is at the Fireplace Project.

He now owns more than 20 pieces by the Reunion artists. “Jim’s very energetic,” Mr. Oppel said, “and he’s a great collector.”

Mr. Chanos wrote in an e-mail that he was drawn to the artists’ collective commitment both to the House and to their colleagues in the young Miami arts community. “This was more of a factor in my support than their obvious talent,” he wrote, “which is self-evident for anyone to see.”

“Jim’s patronage has been instrumental for us,” Mr. Oppel said. “And it’s nice to have his support once again for this show.”

Mr. Williams, for his part, met the artists while curating the art for a new Four Seasons Hotel, which opened in 2000 in Miami. “He went to every studio in the city,” Mr. Baxter said. “He knew every artist.”

A show at the Fireplace Project was something Mr. Williams had been mulling over for some time, but planning began in earnest last Christmas when Mr. Oppel created a model of the gallery, showing how the work would be displayed. (Prices for the work range between \$2,500 and \$25,000.)

“I’ve known all these artists for a long time,” Mr. Williams said. “I thought it was the right time for them to do something together again, hence ‘Reunion.’ It’s a very special show for us all. These guys are like family to me.”

The artists’ work is distinct in style and subject, but they share a refined sense of reflective self-consciousness, and an aesthetic sensibility that came up in interviews with each of the artists, demonstrating a break from the irony and bravado that defined many artists of the preceding generation.

“We’ve seen each other’s work in progress,” Mr. Rey said. “From the development stages, to where it was coming from, to where it was going. So it all makes sense to us.”

“A dialectical approach visually,” Mr. Oppel said, “is something we share. We make things that are paradoxical, within the concept of a series.”

“That’s our tendency,” Mr. Baxter said, “to differentiate between abstraction and repetition.”

“We agree philosophically,” Mr. Arsham said, “and our work has similar tangents.”

Mr. Baxter has five paintings in the show, done in black, gray, and white. One is a portrait of his father and grandfather in New Jersey done from an archival black-and-white print; the others, a series of four “Untitled” bull’s-eye compositions. At first glance they appear unrelated, but the artist explained away that misperception.

“They’re electron defractions of photographs,” he said. “I took the liberty of what I saw, and there is a representation of time and motion; it’s never static.”

Tensions among imaginary architectural elements define Mr. Arsham’s paintings and sculpture. In his wall installation a fluorescent light tube appears to bend where it is affixed to the wall. “It creates the illusion of quiet,” he said, “but it’s

also disturbing. It's about the fluidity of architecture, and the malleability of nature.”

Mr. Rey is best known for his work with Rorschach-like panels that are in actuality textual messages contrasting opposite emotional sensations. He has also made a wooden installation called “Word Jumble.” It also plays with meaning. “It has two Ts, an H, an R, and a U. It spells truth,” he said. “But I don't usually tell people because I want them to think about what a word jumble is.”

“Light Matters,” a painting by Mr. Oppel might be a manifestation of a dystopian world, where the glowing embers of a building sink into a river, against a mist of gray high-rise towers. “It's the sun reflecting on the windows,” Mr. Oppel said. “It creates an image of the building as melting, but it's up to the viewer to see a benign or malign angle. I leave it open.”

“It's similar to magic and engineering,” Mr. Oppel said. “The degree to which we see something as one or the other is based on a level of knowledge. To a physicist a wall is just a shell of electrons, it's all about context.”

The pieces in “Reunion” may never be exactly what they seem, although the friendships among the artists, Mr. Chanos, and Mr. Williams seem forged by time and unambiguous.

After the opening Mr. Chanos hosted a dinner for the artists. Sitting on a deck in Montauk, with the soft wind blowing on rattan decorations and a crowd of attractive revelers packed cheek by jowl, one could almost mistake the scene for South Beach. But that, as the “Reunion” artists might say, would be a misperception.

“Reunion” will be at the Fireplace Project through July 28.