

Miami to Art World: Come on Down!

Written by Victor Barrenechea
October 2009

The Fountainhead Residency brings artists to town, puts them up, and turns them loose



Miami's emerging contemporary arts scene has a lot going for it -- youth, energy, cultural cross-pollination, even good weather. But it suffers from one vexing problem: isolation. We're down here; the rest of the art world is out there. Part of that is a factor of geography, but it's also simply a matter of being new. Yes, the global art cognoscenti descend upon the city every December with Art Basel Miami Beach, but our own local art often seems to get lost in the commotion.

Many people understand that engagement with the outside art world is essential for growth and maturity. Without that, Miami's art scene risks slipping into irrelevancy. Fortunately a number of local galleries and cultural institutions showcase contemporary talent from all over the world. If that's a good thing, why not take it one step further and bring artists themselves to Miami? That's exactly what husband-and-wife collectors Dan and Kathryn Mikesell have been doing since March 2008, when they launched their Fountainhead Residency program.

The Mikesells have both worked in the computer software industry (Dan currently runs Oracle's communications division in Latin America), and both share a love of art. Kathryn notes that Dan's parents were art collectors, and recalls that Dan himself "had a few pieces when we met -- but it's just gone crazy since then. It's only grown."

Indeed their home could be easily mistaken for an art gallery, with works on display in every room, including the garage, where Purvis Young paintings cover the walls. Even their two children's bedrooms are decorated with works of art the kids have chosen for themselves. Clearly this is a family immersed in art. But as Kathryn explains, purchasing art and hanging it on the wall wasn't enough. "We really wanted the opportunity to get to know the artists whose work we collect," she says. "There's something rewarding about seeing the artist's process from start to finish."

Since their marriage 11 years ago, the Mikesells have lived in the Upper Eastside's Morningside neighborhood, though they've been in their current home for just five years. When a three-bedroom house across the street went on sale in 2006, they bought it with the intention of

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making it a place for their parents to live once they got older and needed more care.

But what to do with the home in the meantime? Rather than rent it, they decided to do something radically different. Why not let artists use it -- for free? Thus was born the Fountainhead Residency, a program that allows select artists to live and work in the house for up to two months at a stretch. Since it opened its doors, the Fountainhead Residency has hosted more than 40 artists, many from New York and Boston, but also from Berlin, Chicago, London, Barcelona, and Los Angeles, among other locales.

Some artists are invited personally by the Mikesells, while others are selected through an application process. Still more are recommended by fellow artists, local galleries, or other institutions. The program, says Kathryn, also “supports all the local museums and nonprofits by hosting their artists.” An artist may be coming to town for an exhibition at the Bass Museum, Miami Art Museum, or even an alternative space like the Bas Fisher Invitational, and the residency puts them up while they install their show. Last summer, for instance, the Mikesells hosted the internationally known, L.A.-based artist Fritz Haeg, who was participating in the Museum of Contemporary Art’s “Convention” show. The Fountainhead Residency has also forged a special partnership with the nonprofit Locust Projects, and houses all the gallery’s out-of-town guest artists.



For many artists, however, the residency is a just welcome opportunity to work in a fresh, new environment. “It gives people the chance to get out of their daily grind and to have a change of scenery,” says Kathryn.

Typically there are two artists staying at the three-bedroom home who’ve been invited, and another who is in Miami for an exhibition or special event. Most residents work in the 2300-square-foot house, sharing the living room, family room, and dining area, utilizing the spaces in a variety of ways. Kathryn recalls L.A.-based artist W. Tucker hunched over on his knees and drawing on the floor. The 400-square-foot garage is also used as a studio.

Other artists may prefer to be away from their living environment and opt instead to work at the

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Fountainhead Studios at 7339 NW Miami Ct. These studios, though, are typically rented out by the Mikesells to Miami artists at affordable prices.

In exchange for round-trip air fare and free housing, all artists agree to allow the Fountainhead Residency to choose one work created during their stay and add it to the residency's permanent collection. Eventually the growing collection will be loaned to museums and showcased during Art Basel Miami Beach.

Between the processing of applications, efforts to coordinate with local galleries, keeping the house clean and stocked with towels, dishes, and other basics, running the program is quite time-consuming. "To do it well," says Kathryn, "it's almost a full-time job." All that work seems to be appreciated by the artists, many of whom are visiting Miami for the first time.



Though Morningside is centrally located amid all of Miami's popular art hubs, it is a kind of urban oasis, with its quiet, tree-lined streets and proximity to Biscayne Bay and the city's largest bayfront park. Kathryn says some artists have enjoyed their stay so much, they've considered moving here. "I can tell you that six of the artists who've come down have considered moving," she says, adding that four of them are now trying to do just that.

Another appealing aspect of the program is the opportunity for visitors to interact with local artists. Miami's art scene is small compared to many other cities, which fosters a certain camaraderie. As Dan Mikesell describes it: "It's very collaborative. Miami artists know each other and often work together. They don't compete at all." For example, earlier this year, when New York artist Tom McGrath was at the residency for a show at David Castillo Gallery, he was able to spread the word about colleague Kristopher Benedict, which led to a Benedict show with artist Peter LaBier at Gallery Diet. Says Kathryn: "Open up the dialogue between artists, and the sky's the limit."

The opportunities run both ways. When international artists and Fountainhead residents Mike Swaney, Ronald Cornelissen, and W. Tucker needed someone to help them with tools for their project, Miami artist Lun-yi Tsai stepped up. This collaboration ultimately led to a proposed

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group show featuring the four artists, to take place in Beijing, China, next year.

Dan and Kathryn Mikesell have yet more plans for strengthening Miami's ties to the outside art world. The Fountainhead Residency, they say, will soon host curators from the U.S. and Europe who will tour the studios of local artists. "Unless you live here, you really don't know what Miami has to offer," says Kathryn. "The benefit I think [Fountainhead] has provided us and the art community has been priceless."

Adds her husband with a smile: "It's a *good* way to spend some money."

For more information visit www.fountainheadresidency.com

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