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A NEW BEGINNING FOR THE MIAMI ART MUSEUM

An Interview with Thomas Collins

ARTDISTRICTS recently had the opportunity to meet with Thomas Collins, the newly appointed director of the Miami Art Museum (MAM). After serving for five years as director of the Neuberger Museum of Art in New York, Collins will officially start at MAM on August 16. Here he shares with us his thoughts about Miami and his ideas for the new museum.

By Irina Leyva-Pérez

Irina Leyva-Pérez – Good morning, Thom. I know you are extremely busy, so thanks for reserving this time for our interview.

Thomas Collins – Thanks, I appreciate your interest.

ILP – Without question, your assumption of this position is a great opportunity for Miami, since you are a young and vital professional who has extensive experience, for example, as director of the Neuberger Museum. Could you tell

me a bit about your academic formation and your professional experience?

TC – Sure. I have an undergraduate degree and a graduate degree of art history and my principal interest has been modern and contemporary art, principally of the Americas, although not exclusively. Now that the art world is so international, is such a global market and culture, it is not possible to concentrate on any one particular part of the world in a meaningful way, if in fact you are interested in modern and contemporary art.

My training is particularly in the social history of art, so I am very interested in what art means, what art and art communities mean in larger communities. I am very interested in what art can do for individuals and for society.

ILP – Well, you came to an interesting city in that regard! The community in Miami is really diverse.

TC – Yes, it is fantastic. Actually I think that one of the reasons I was more interested in coming to Miami is the fact that Miami is so wonderfully diverse in terms of its population and its demographics but is also a city that, unlike many major cities in the United States, is still really growing. It has a great dynamism and vitality and . . . it is really a kind of center of a global nexus for cultural exchange, particularly in the Americas but beyond as well, certainly in the Atlantic rim.

There is also the idea that here is an opportunity to grow an already very important institution into a larger one. Those two facts together add up to a terrific opportunity, I think—to create a museum that would be very, very progressive in terms of the way that it addresses its community. I think that Miami, in many ways, looks like many cities in North America will work in the next twenty or thirty years, in terms of its population, its economy, and its cultural landscape.

So this is an opportunity to create a new kind of museum, to address that interest, and if we do this successfully together as a community, if we make the Miami Art Museum a kind of progressive model for museums in North America and beyond, I think we will be way ahead of the field, way ahead our peers, certainly our peers in the United States. The rest is really an exciting opportunity—for me, for the institution, and



Miami Art Museum Director Thomas Collins. All images are courtesy of Miami Art Museum.

I think for the city of Miami, with its various communities, which have been very supportive of the Miami Art Museum.

ILP – As you can imagine, we are all anxious to see the new museum up and running. We have some idea of what the project will look like from the drawings by Herzog and de Meuron. Can you tell me which phase of the process the project is in right now? When are you planning to break ground and when is the museum anticipated to open?

TC – Absolutely! Everything is full steam ahead. As you probably read recently, the museum had an obligation to raise a certain amount of money privately before any of the city funding for the project could be released. Recently we reached that goal, so now we have all the money we need, between private funds and the bonds that the people of Miami-Dade approved. We have all the money to start the construction, actually all the money associated with building the building.

Early next week they are going to do a little bit of environmental remediation on the building site, which essentially means that they are cleaning it up. That process will take a couple of months. . . . Depending on how long that process takes, groundbreaking will happen in either late October or early November. It is very, very soon, so, as you might imagine, the designs for the building are substantially completed now and it will all certainly be completed by the end of the summer. We are in very good shape and moving on with the project. We still need to raise funds to create an endowment for the museum for operating, exhibitions, and educational programs in the future. But we have the money we need now to build the building. So it is a very exciting moment to be arriving.

ILP – I am sure you are aware of the importance of Art Basel Miami Beach to the Miami cultural scene, which is very vibrant during the first week of December. But for the rest of

the year, it is kind of dull if you compare it with other cities in the United States. How do you see the new MAM in this environment? Do you think that it will play a role in revitalizing Miami's cultural offerings? What sort of exhibition program do you envision for MAM?

TC – Well, that is such a great question. Someone else asked me the same question in a different way, and it is a very important question to answer. What they asked me, and this is probably an easier way to get a handle on this, is what I thought were the principal differences between the modern and contemporary art scenes in Miami and New York City.

I think in many ways Miami is different; you just described some of them—of course it has Miami Art Basel, which is an engine for a lot of activity around the time that it happens but is also one of the reasons that Miami and its art scene are much more visible outside of Miami in the United States, and in the world, than they might otherwise be.

The first thing is that in Miami there is an incredibly diverse community that is also empowered, very passionate and very vocal, and these are populations that want to see themselves, their histories, and their current concerns represented in the art that they consume.

More than any other city in North America, Miami has a community of extraordinary private collectors. What is interesting, and I think is different about Miami, is that these extraordinary private collectors are not the sort of slavish followers of the art market. They don't just collect what is fashionable or stylish, and they also have really led the public institutions in Miami. They are way out in front of contemporary art practices, they collect intelligently and aggressively, their focus is international, they organize very bold, innovative public presentations. I think these private important collectors in Miami have really stimulated and shaped a dialogue about the visual arts in really critical and compelling ways.



The new Miami Art Museum at Museum Park, Bay view, Herzog & de Meuron. © Herzog & de Meuron, visualization by Artefactorylab.

And this is different in other major art cities in the United States, where it is the big institutions that generally lead and collectors follow. In Miami these collectors have led and they lead in a very progressive way, so I think the Miami Art Museum and other visual art institutions need to position themselves with reference to what these private collectors are doing in order to benefit the community. One of the things that the Miami Art Museum very specifically can do, in regard to these extraordinary private collections, is that it can be a central gathering place for disseminating information about all the things that are available in the community, not just what is going to be available at the Miami Art Museum.

Finally, and I think this is something that I haven't heard that much, . . . Miami, as a place to live and work, is much more hospitable to emerging artists and to startup commercial galleries than New York City can be, given this economy. As a result Miami culture produces all of them—not just visual artists but musicians, playwrights, theater companies, orchestras, and various kinds of musical ensembles. They can be more experimental, take more risks, and can be more meaningfully engaged in their own primary work, in their own artwork.

In New York, most of these artists, unless they are very, very famous or independently wealthy, spend more of their time trying to get by, to survive, and they get to work on their art in their free time. Well, of course I am not suggesting that artists in Miami don't also need to work on some other job, but the community is not as challenged economically in terms of just scraping by. There are lots of opportunities that are unique to Miami; this community still benefits from an unusually high degree of national visibility, and it is because of Miami Art Basel and . . . because we have these extraordinary private collectors in Miami.

In many ways that is an opportunity that has been exploited a bit but can be exploited a lot more, and I am interested in figuring out ways that the Miami Art Museum can participate in stimulating, supporting, and helping grow both the local artists' community and the local commercial exhibitions community.

ILP – What you just said is related to my next question. Is MAM planning to offer more opportunities to local artists to exhibit? Will local curators have opportunities to present independent projects?

TC – This is a great question, and, you know, I haven't even started working full time yet! We are right in the middle of generating a new five-year plan for the museum and I think all of these possibilities are very much on the table. It is going to be a vastly expanded museum—more space, more staff, more resources—and so I would say, in principle, I hope that it does become an institution where regional artists, curators, teachers, and others would have more of an opportunity to make themselves visible and to work with the institution and the community.

One of the things I am interested in is figuring out how this expanding institution—and when I say expanding institution I am not talking just about physically expanded; I am talking about expanded programming, educational resources, and having more of an active presence in communities—how can the Miami Art Museum promote artistic activity throughout Miami-Dade, right in the communities, that would have

a meaningful impact not just on what happens in the building and not even just what happens in our schools but on what happens in community centers, on the streets, in parks, in other kinds of social services organizations.

I think all of these possibilities are going to be explored in this new planning process, and I will have a lot more to say about that after the first year, as we will have a draft of this new plan for the institution. I hope we'll have a chance to talk about it then, because I'll have more specific things to say about outreach and public programs.

ILP – Finally, what can you tell me about MAM's acquisition program? What is your plan for developing the collection now that you'll have a bigger space?

TC – One of the motivations for expanding the exhibition space was to make MAM a collecting institution, and I think it is very important for people to understand that there is a real difference between private collecting and collecting in the public trust. Private collectors, even if they are very community oriented, may collect, buy, sell, and exhibit whatever they like, or not. As a public trust, as a public institution, the Miami Art Museum will, first of all, have an obligation to collect with an eye towards putting together a collection of what we think, given what we know about the field and art history, will still be in the public trust one or two hundred years from now—a collection that will represent the vast of what is happening in modern and contemporary art now.

We have a certain kind of special obligation in the way we think about our collections; we can't be idiosyncratic about them, and no one person's taste can govern how the collections are put together. So we are in the process now, as part of this planning, of devising in very great detail plans for acquiring works, principally after 1960 up to the present, and working with living artists to make new works just for the MAM collection, and of course there will be, for all the reasons that I already described to you, a very serious emphasis on the modern and contemporary art of the Americas.

But of course one can't tell the story of art making in the Americas without talking about art making in Western Europe, in Western Africa, in the Caribbean, in parts of Asia, particularly Japan, if you are looking at South America. It will be an international collection that we'll put together, which we hope will represent the best of what has happened in the art world.

We need to put together a collecting plan with an eye towards building collections not just through commissions and purchases but also through significant gifts from private collectors, given the richness of private collecting in Miami-Dade and in the region. We are just at the beginning of that, but it is enormously promising, and what we hope happens is that the Miami Art Museum becomes, in terms of its collections, a repository for the best of visual culture from the last fifty years and into the future—that will make it possible for us to tell many, many stories about the art and culture of our time to the audiences that we serve. ■

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