

THE ART OF COLLECTING

Growing market, rich in adventure

As economic turmoil hits traditional art centers, Latin America thrives

BY NINA SIEGAL

Juan Yarur, the youngest son of a Chilean textile magnate, bought his first work of art when he was 12 years old. By the age of 19, he was looking for a Warhol.

Mr. Yarur reached out at the time to Cecilia Brunson, an art adviser in London who suggested that he explore Art Basel in Miami Beach, a fair that could expose him to any number of galleries selling Warhols and more.

“When I finally went there, I became enamored of so many works of art without knowing why, as my art knowledge back then was quite minimal,” Mr. Yarur said by email recently. “I recall that collecting was something that I could feel, and I admired the collections that were on view there, but with time this feeling became intensified.”

Mr. Yarur, now 29, is one of Chile’s most influential collectors of contemporary art, having acquired about 230 works including pieces by Gerhard Richter, Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Takashi Murakami — and, yes, Warhol — not to mention a large collection of works by contemporary Chilean artists. He also started a nonprofit art foundation, Fundación AMA, which attempts to bring emerging Chilean artists to the attention of international collectors. And this summer, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Santiago exhibited about 80 pieces from his collection, taking up two floors of the museum.

Mr. Yarur is just one of many art collectors in South America who were introduced to the international art world at Art Basel in Miami Beach, the sandal-footed version of the giant art fair that opened in Basel, Switzerland, in 1970. Miami Beach, which will be host to the event for the 12th time from Thursday to Sunday, is attracting a rapidly growing group of collectors like Mr. Yarur from across South America.

“People tend to think of the art market in Latin America as being just Mexico and Brazil,” Marc Spiegler, director of Art Basel, said by telephone. “But there is a real emerging market in Argentina, and now there are real collectors in Chile, Peru and Colombia — and actually across the continent.”

While there have always been collectors in these countries, there are signs that things are changing rapidly. “The

big difference is that now there are more of them, and they don’t just buy art from their own region,” Mr. Spiegler said. “Now, younger collectors are looking at older collections and seeing how global they are, and so they jump into the market and they immediately start collecting internationally.”

Ten years ago, it would have been difficult to find a single major art collector in Chile, said Bernardita Mandiola, the director of Mr. Yarur’s foundation, who moved to Chile from New York, where she was a consultant for Christie’s and Sotheby’s. She estimates that there are about eight collectors in Chile today who regularly spend more than \$30,000 on works of art, attend art fairs around the world and hold positions on museum boards.

Art fairs in Latin America — including ArtRio in Brazil, Zona Maco in Mexico City, ArteBA in Buenos Aires, ArtBO in Bogotá, Colombia, and Feria Chaco in Santiago — have also encouraged the activities of these collectors in the region, Ms. Mandiola said.

“When I went to the first Art Basel Miami, there were a few really big-name Latin American collectors: the ones everyone knew at Christie’s and Sotheby’s,” Ms. Mandiola said of the fair held in 2002. “Today, you have an influx of people who are maybe not collectors but who are thinking of becoming collectors. That’s a big shift that has been done through Art Basel Miami. It gives people who are just vaguely interested and just thinking about it or starting to buy an opportunity to come and get their feet wet.”

Many people are initially drawn to the fair for its festive reputation — with celebrities including Demi Moore, Beyoncé and Jay Z showing up for parties — but return for the art, Mr. Spiegler said. “Culture is much more socially driven in Latin America; people who work together also vacation together,” he said.

“One collector in Brazil or Colombia or Peru or Chile will come to Miami Beach and bring some friends — who may not even be collectors, or seriously engaged in the visual arts,” he continued. “They’ll come because their friends are going, and once they realize what an incredible range of work is available, they’ll often start collecting themselves, first at a low level and then at a much higher level.”

Juan Carlos Verme, one of Peru’s leading art collectors and president of the board of trustees of the Museo de Arte de Lima, or MALI, first learned about art while he was a university student in Zurich. His mother gave him



OTTO MUEHL

money to buy a bed for his room, but he spent it on two Miró prints instead — happily sleeping on a mat on the floor and waking up beneath the works.

When he returned to Peru in 1988, he said, there were few if any art collectors to speak of because the “country was in a state of despair” after years of terrorist campaigns. Now there are 100 to 120 serious international art collectors, he estimates.

“I think many of them have emerged in the last 10 years,” Mr. Verme said by telephone while en route to the Mercosul Biennial in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Strong economic growth in the country has trickled down to other sectors and bolstered the art market, he said.

Mr. Verme attended the first edition of Art Basel in Miami Beach and has bought many works there over the years.

Today he is working to cultivate a new generation of collectors in Peru by setting up acquisitions committees for MALI, “so that the collectors in Peru don’t only collect more, but that they

collect better,” he said. “If you have collectors that buy anything, then there could be a tendency for the artists to be satisfied with what they do more easily, and the quality and the magic may disappear.”

Ana Leticia Fialho, an independent art researcher and consultant based in Brazil, said that, unlike Asia or the Middle East, Latin America has always had a connection to Western art traditions, with museums that hold collections of European masters and art exhibitions like the São Paulo Biennial, which has been running since 1951. “But what’s happening now is that we have a higher number of net-worth individuals and suddenly we have a really important population of individuals who are very cosmopolitan, who buy art,” she said. “And because the economic situation in other parts of the world isn’t so good, gallerists are starting to look at this region as a place where they’re finding business opportunities.”

This new group of collectors, Ms.

Fialho continued, may already know about historical, blue-chip works of art, she said, but “they are more free in their choices. Maybe they’re more adventurous and they’re able to invest and to search for very contemporary work.”

That has certainly been the case for Mr. Yarur. “I see my changes in taste through the years,” he acknowledged. “Like starting with Warhol and going for flashier items to end up with something like Otto Muehl or Paz Errázuriz,” he said, referring to the Viennese Actionist artist who died last May and a contemporary Chilean photographer.

This year, Mr. Yarur will be at Art Basel in Miami Beach to meet with the acquisitions committee for the Tate Modern in London, of which he is a member. He has already prepurchased pieces from a few galleries that will be at the fair this year, he said, so he isn’t planning to shop much.

“That being said,” he added, “if something dazzles me, I will seriously consider it.”

“Materialaktionen 1964-1967” by Otto Muehl, part of Juan Yarur’s collection. Mr. Yarur, 29, one of the few serious art collectors in Chile, started a nonprofit foundation to help Chilean artists gain exposure internationally.

A man of mixed materials

BUENOS AIRES

Argentine artist finds overseas success raises his visibility at home

BY ED STOCKER

Félix looked unimpressed. As Eduardo Stupia, one of Argentina’s most renowned artists, added touches to a canvas spread on a table in front of him, Félix surveyed the scene from the top of a marble staircase, seemingly unmoved.

To be fair to Félix, he is a cat, pet-in-residence at the gently dilapidated townhouse in the Almagro neighborhood of Buenos Aires that serves as Mr. Stupia’s

studio, shared with six other artists. It is a striking space dating from 1910, with high ceilings, creaking wooden floorboards and Italian-style mosaic tiles harking back to Argentina’s golden age, when the cattle industry positioned the country among the world’s richest.

Dotted around the three rooms that Mr. Stupia rents are works of various sizes — from about 20 centimeters, or eight inches, wide to a couple of meters, most of them in black and white. Each is remarkably detailed, featuring fine lines and brush strokes in materials as varied as pencil, charcoal, ink, acrylic and watercolor.

“I try to use all kinds of materials, mixed together — often very antagonistic ones that shouldn’t be combined,” Mr. Stupia, 62, said with a wry smile.

“Or at least that’s what my old art teachers used to say. But I think that when you mix materials you’re also mixing a certain type of language. Each material has its own character, its own quality, its own spirit.”

Mr. Stupia is best known for works that he describes as abstract landscapes, in which details often replicate or mirror themselves in other parts of the picture, a method exemplified in the title of a series he produced in 2010: “Reflejos,” or “Reflections.” Stare at one of his abstract canvases for a short while and you start to think you can recognize conventional objects or vistas.

His early work was clearly influenced by comic book culture, while many of his pieces from the 1980s and ’90s recalled traditional Oriental calligraphy and painting. But it is his more recent pieces that delve most deeply into abstract painting, “I try to create an atmosphere, a resonance,” he said. “My works are like images that are about to appear and then disappear as soon as you try and catch them.”

After he started his artistic life as a draftsman and then gradually incorporated painting, it is only quite recently that Mr. Stupia gained international recognition, something he attributes to a retrospective of his work at the Recoleta Cultural Center in Buenos Aires in 2006.

“Without doubt, much of Eduardo Stupia’s success stems from the retrospective,” said the curator of that exhibition, Mercedes Casanegra. “By then he’d had a 30-year career and was recognized by many, but was still a ‘cult’ artist. This was the first time that his work had been displayed like this — an anthology of his career since the very beginning. And it went down well with the public.”

His international recognition was secured when he became a featured artist at the 2012 São Paulo Biennial, and he exhibited in London for the first time from September 2012 to January 2013, at the Rosenfeld Porcini gallery. Among his admirers is Luis Pérez-Oramas, who organized the São Paulo Biennial and is the curator of Latin American art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which acquired one of Mr. Stupia’s untitled works, dated 1985, for its permanent collection.



2013 EDUARDO STUPIA

Eduardo Stupia is best known for works that he describes as abstract landscapes.

“I admire his capacity to create these dense, complex architectural landscapes that are absolutely abstract,” Mr. Pérez-Oramas said by telephone. “It’s about galaxies and densities — there’s a cosmic visual logic to it, produced on a very masterfully reduced palate.”

Mr. Stupia, an admirer of German art and particularly of Gerhard Richter, attributes his own success to sheer hard work. While he began his artistic career in the early 1970s, it is only in the past few years that he has been able to give up a job in the film industry — as well as designing covers and brochures for several publishing houses — to dedicate

himself to art full time.

Unlike neighboring Brazil, Argentina has yet to foment a large collectors’ market. “Although wealthy people care about owning things in Argentina, this hasn’t stretched to artistic objects,” Mr. Stupia explained.

But the country remains heavily influenced by what happens beyond its borders. “When you are successful abroad, you become immediately more visible and desirable here,” Mr. Stupia said, referring to a tendency in Argentina to look to Europe or the United States for validation.

Mr. Stupia has been working with the collector and curator Jorge Mara for

nearly a decade, and together they have promoted the artist’s work overseas. Mr. Mara, who was born in Uruguay, first set up a gallery in Buenos Aires in 1984, before relocating to Madrid in the 1990s. He returned to the Argentine capital in 2001.

The two men are friends as well as colleagues and share an easygoing sense of humor that was in evidence as they met in Buenos Aires for lunch at an Italian restaurant. Over white wine and main courses, the conversation quickly turned to Art Basel in Miami Beach, the United States version of the Swiss art fair, whose 12th edition the two will attend this week.

“The fair was a godsend for the Latin American market,” Mr. Mara said. “It was a very shrewd thing for them to do. Art Basel Miami Beach was made for the Latin and North American audience. There are so many Brazilians that have bought apartments in Miami — and they have to put something on the walls.”

Mr. Stupia, who will be exhibited at the Miami Beach fair for the third time this year — with about 10 new pieces — said his work does well there. This may have something to do with the fact that he makes himself available to chat with attendees, a rarity in the more formal environment of Old World galleries.

Mr. Mara, who estimates that about 60 percent of his sales come from overseas events, said that comparatively affordable prices also played a big part, with Mr. Stupia’s works priced between \$10,000 and \$30,000. “We have very good artists in Argentina,” Mr. Mara said, “and internationally they are still affordable.”

The artist said he shared “a common point of view about what painting is” with Argentine artists such as Luis Felipe Noé and Marcia Schvartz, if not always a similar style.

Mr. Stupia was eager to point out that he is not a contemporary artist. Unlike the latest generation, he said, he has no desire to be a controversial character alongside the artwork. Nor does he want to dictate anything to viewers of his art — which is why the majority of his works are untitled. “I stay in the canvas,” he said, leaning over the table. “Everything happens in the canvas.”

