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Untitled art fair opens in Miami before heading to the West Coast

Fair director Jeff Lawson on why he's expanding to San Francisco



Jeff Lawson at Untitled Miami in 2016 © Casey Kelbaugh

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Forty minutes before the doors opened at the Untitled art fair in Miami South Beach on Tuesday, its director Jeff Lawson was walking around with a paint tray and roller in hand. “We’re a small team,” he said. Around him, dealers put finishing touches to the booths, which fan out along two avenues.

When Untitled launched in 2012, its future was hardly secure. Did Miami need another entry-level art fair? Scope, Pulse and Nada did a fine job between them. But Lawson got quite a few things right. The beach location, by 12th Street, is a coup; windows all along the longest side look straight out to sand then sea. Then there’s the design by local architects Keenan and Riley (Terence Riley was once curator of architecture at MoMA, but came to Miami and back into practice over a decade ago), which has created an interior arrangement that is comfortable and easy to navigate. Finally, the curation of galleries, which is carried out by the Paris-based Melanie Scarciglia and Christophe Boutin and the fair’s artistic director Omar Lopez-Chahoud, whose previous role at the Madrid-based fair Arco means he has the connections with the Spanish speaking world that are all-important in Miami.

This year, Untitled has already delivered some decent sales. Paintings by Patrick Angus, an artist who died young in 1992 and is in the process of rediscovery, were selling briskly for up to \$25,000 at Thomas Fuchs, while New York gallery The Hole sold its entire solo show of 3D figurative work by Matthew Stone within hours.

Lawson must be relieved by the smooth sales: in a month’s time he’s launching Untitled

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San Francisco. He always intended to expand — a man of an apparently entrepreneurial bent, he'd previously been a sales person at Artnet, worked with his father in real estate in Florida, then developed a fragrance tradefair with some success in Dubai, Las Vegas and New York.

But he wanted to stay domestic and spent three years looking for a second location for his art fair. "I just kept coming back to San Francisco. It's an attractive, sophisticated city with good restaurants and hotels," he said. He is focusing on the Bay Area, however, and not Silicon Valley, though he rebuffed my view that contemporary art doesn't yet seem to engender much enthusiasm among the tech types.

In San Francisco, the environment will be very different. The fair is being staged on Pier 70, an old naval yard. "If Miami is clean and austere, then San Francisco needed to be raw and rugged and a bit rusty," he said. The local architecture practice OPA, who have previously designed a pavilion for James Turrell and a complicated installation for a suite of Gerhard Richter paintings, are fitting out the interior.

Similarities with Miami will include close co-operation with local not-for-profit set-ups, among them 500 Capp Street, named after the house of artist David Ireland, which has been maintained in the state he left it when he died in 2009. "We'll be recreating the series of cement balls he made in the 1970s, by moving the material from palm to palm, in the fair," said Lawson.

Maurizio Cattelan's and Pierpaolo Ferri's Toiletpaper lounge — one of the big hits of the 2015 edition in Miami — will be reprised, though whether in the same shocking pink, carpet-covered condition as last year in Miami remains to be seen.

Untitled Radio will also be part of the offering in San Francisco. Run by Amanda Schmitt, this series of talks is broadcast from a large wooden structure in the Miami tent, around the bottom of which are headphones so visitors to the fair can stop and listen in — as well as online. The structure is by artists Alois Kronschlaeger and Paul Amenta, with architect Ted Lott of Lott3Metz Architecture. Untitled Radio has proved an effective alternative to the more traditional talks programme at other fairs, and a significant archive of artist conversations has already been accrued over five years. As with any new venture there will be unknowns and unforeseens. But as Lawson said: "It's northern California. The weather will be nice."