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Antiestablishment artists well established

BY BRETT SOKOL

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"No one tells you no: If I wanted to take the roof off, they'd let me." That operating philosophy is why experimental filmmaker Clifton Childree adores Wynwood's Locust Projects. It's why he believes his recent *Dream-Cum-Tru* exhibit there -- a singularly scatological take on Buster Keaton's theatrics amid an array of hand-built vintage carnival attractions -- was received so well. And it's clearly why dozens of Childree's fellow Miami artists donated their work to this month's "Smash & Grab" fundraiser at the nonprofit alternative space, mingling with a who's who of local collectors for an annual event that's equal parts benefit auction and game show.

That night, as the to-be-auctioned works hung on Locust Projects' walls, ticket buyers scrambled to claim their booty as their names were plucked from a hat in rapid-fire succession -- some barely escaping head-on collisions as they frantically rushed past each other in the hopes of snagging a Carlos Betancourt photograph, a Daniel Arsham gouache or a Timothy Buwalda painting.

The scene perfectly captured Locust's driving spirit: high on slapdash energy and cheekily more than willing to send up art-world conventions.

Indeed, energy is about all its founding trio of artists -- Westen Charles, Elizabeth Withstandley and Cooper (who dropped his first name long ago) -- had when they established Locust in late 1998. Their mission was clear: serve up site-specific installations from artists local and otherwise of the kind they all had seen at nonprofit spaces when they were students at Pratt Institute in New York City.

But though their Wynwood warehouse satisfied their immediate needs -- having once been a crackhouse, and still knee-deep in sawdust from a previous carpenter tenant, it was cheap -- the actually running of such a space was a bit more complicated.

Cooper recalls arguing with a city official over the precise classification of the building's occupational license:

"I kept telling him we didn't have a traditional occupation -- we were artists! So then he wanted to know how many desks we had!"

Once the doors finally opened to the public, a bigger question loomed: Would anyone show up?

BOOMING SCENE

Ten years later, those hoped-for crowds regularly turn out in force. In fact, Wynwood has become ground zero for Miami's art scene, laying claim to more than 60 galleries, adding a surreal element to the sporadic drug traffic and walking wounded on the streets that surround Locust.

Meanwhile, Locust's 2008 budget reached \$172,000, and expenditures on individual exhibits now average \$5,000 (up from approximately zilch), thanks to "Smash & Grab" proceeds and several grants. A full-time director, Claire Breukel, was hired in 2006. And local collectors Dan and Kathryn Mikesell have turned their Morningside house into the Fountainhead Residency, providing up to three months of housing and air fare for out-of-town artists as they fashion and install their Locust shows.

For Withstandley, now a Los Angeles-based filmmaker, the change is jarring. "Forget about housing," she says, laughing. "I was busy scrounging money for stamps!"

"Only about 3 percent of all artists can live off their art," says Kathryn Mikesell, citing a May report by the National Endowment for the Arts. "It's a wonderful thing to be able to give them an opportunity to create what they want, not just what they need to sell."

For emerging artists, that dichotomy can be even more stark.

"I love the Miami Art Museum and everything [director] Terry Riley is doing there," Dan Mikesell adds. "But a traditional museum can't really be avant-garde. Their audience will only allow them to go so far."

Locust board chairwoman and longtime supporter Debra Scholl agrees: "I know it's a funny expression, but artists can really let their freak flag fly at Locust." However, Locust distances itself from more than the museum milieu. Entire categories of art are anathema.

"I'm not going to rag on Art Basel -- everybody does that," Breukel says. "But with art fairs there is a tendency to buy work that is more object-based. Things like drawings that are easier to put in your home and show off."

To Withstandley, the de-emphasis on object-based art was precisely what made Locust so valuable to the Miami of 1998: "It just seemed so important to have a space not associated with the commercial world, a space that wasn't about selling things but about presenting an experience."

You can find that attitude given free reign in the program notes for Locust's current 10th anniversary show, *Inevitable Continuum*, for which 10 artists who've previously exhibited there in turn select 10 younger artists to present new work.

"There is a reason," the show's co-curator Gean Moreno writes, "why Miami's B-movies and scat-electronica, as well as the para-literary genres of crime fiction and South Beach noir, feel, in their trashiness and lo-fi values, more vital and exciting, less middle of the road and cautious, than so many of the things that hang in local exhibition spaces, personal museums, and penthouse walls. The water fountain is often the most exciting thing in the room in these places."

And the antidote to these pallid "alternatives to the official culture?" Locust's scrappy, ephemeral

aesthetic. "*Inevitable Continuum* had to keep moving things forward," Moreno concludes.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Unfortunately, *Inevitable Continuum* doesn't quite live up to that heady billing. Much of the work seems barely formed, as if its artists had picked up their studios, tilted them sideways, and whatever rolled out the front door has made its way to Locust: Half-baked sculpture, disjointed video and a post-modern totem pole whose base emits puffs of vaporized sugar, sending many in the opening night's packed crowd in search of water to flush their irritated eyes. A nearby drinking fountain would have been not only exciting but also a relief.

Yet that freedom to fail is precisely what keeps Locust so vital, even as its founding artists have scaled back their involvement. Cooper, an art snowbird who divides his time between Miami and a rural New Mexico homestead, accepts that having artists create their installations on-site, often from scratch, entails a certain inherent risk.

"The nature of the shows is some of them will work, some if them won't, and you never know in advance." He wouldn't have it any other way.

Neither would Westen Charles, now an art teacher at Miami's Design and Architecture Senior High. Standing on the sidewalk as the last "Smash & Grab" attendees trickle back to their cars, he nurses a beer with a contented smile. The future of Locust is secure for at least another year, thanks to the evening's proceeds of more than \$40,000.

"We've always just shown artists who we think do interesting work, and let the chips fall where they may," Charles says. "Given that paradigm, sometimes you're not always going to get the best work. But it's the best policy for occasionally being able to get great work."

"It's hard to give your baby over to someone else," Charles says, referencing the present stewardship of Bruekel, assistant director Susan Lee-Chun and a fresh generation of board members alongside the founders.

"But they've made this place into what we always wanted it to be. When we started, we had no corporate model, no personal stake for financial gain, and you wouldn't believe how dangerous it was in Wynwood. You could stand here, scream bloody murder for six hours, and nothing would happen. But it was cheap, and we were too dumb to know better."

As if on cue, a drug lookout pedals by on his bicycle, curiously eyeing the scrum of people still hanging in front of Locust. Charles watches him pass and then grins: "We were just three young kids trying to make something happen. We got lucky."