

An Island of Art, and Some Sales



Courtesy of Sarah Douglas
Sofia Maldonado with her work at Magnan/Metz gallery's booth

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PUERTO RICO— Whom does a regional art fair serve? How can it broaden the reach of a local scene? Such questions are the order of the day in Puerto Rico. The island sports some top-notch young talent, but not much of a gallery system at the moment. There is a tight-knit community of collectors, including [Cesar Reyes](#) (best known these days for selling a [Peter Doig](#) painting at [Christie's](#) New York for \$10.20 million last November); Maria and [Alberto de la Cruz](#); Dinorah

and [Horacio Campolietto](#); [Carlos Trapaga](#); **Diana** and [Moisés Berezdivin](#); **Chilo Andreu**; [Jose Alvarez](#); and **Rosalía** and [Humberto Ugobono](#), all of whom, far from limiting themselves to the local offerings, tend to focus on premier work by blue-chip international artists. Much of it they acquired abroad, whether directly through dealers or at art fairs like New York's **Armory Show**, London's **Frieze**, or the **Art Basel** fairs in Switzerland and Miami. And yet, since 2006 Puerto Rico has had its own art fair, Circa, the fifth edition of which ran from January 29 to February 1.

Being relatively young, and therefore at a tender age when the world financial crisis hit, the fair is very much in transition. Its early days were flush: when it began, construction on the \$188 million, 580,000-square-foot Puerto Rico Convention Center had just been completed. The following year, it boasted some 62 exhibitors, 34 of them commercial galleries, and an extensive VIP program that brought in collectors from around the world. In 2008, it held steady, with a little over 40 commercial dealers, including international heavy hitters like Air de Paris and Berlin's Contemporary Fine Arts — the latter of which has populated the island with many, many paintings and sculptures by [Jonathan Meese](#), as a quick tour of local collections can attest. The first three editions of the fair saw numerous visitors from Spain, Mexico, and the United States, including globe-trotting Miami collectors **Don** and [Mera Rubell](#) in 2007.

But last year, when the onset of the global economic downturn left Puerto Rico's real estate market reeling and unemployment figures skyrocketing, the fair moved to its smaller present space in the convention center, hosting only 26 galleries and five solo artist booths for up-and-coming artists. This year, with the local economy still in the doldrums — some 40,000 works were laid off from government jobs recently — the number of participants remained modest, with 30 galleries and six solo booths.

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There were several positive innovations this year, however. The fair moved from April to January dates, capitalizing on the lure of warm weather while also distancing itself from Mexico's **MACO** fair, which previously had competed with Circa for dealers' attention. In another development, a Chinese gallery, **Platform**, was on hand as a result of a new arrangement between the fair and **Art Beijing**. And rather than positioning the Circa Labs portion of the fair — a section where young galleries display their wares in shipping containers — in the parking lot, Circa moved the five containers inside, to the center of the hall, and appointed as curator the Mexican-born [Pablo de la Barra](#), who until recently ran the now-defunct London gallery **Blow de la Barra** with **Detmar Blow**.

This was a good idea: when **Art Basel Miami Beach** brought its adventuresome Art Positions section indoors (where ABMB dispensed with the containers in favor of standard booths), more people saw it. Circa Labs, too, had a freewheeling feel to it, and served as something of a meeting point for fairgoers. The projects on view, which came mainly from galleries in Central America — de la Barra wanted to get American [Javier Peres](#) on the roster, but he was serving on the selection committee for **Art Los Angeles Contemporary**, which ran simultaneously with Circa — ran the gamut from cool minimalist sculptures by [Jose Leon Cerrello](#) at Mexico City's **Proyactos Monclova**, to a pile of DVDs (pirated versions of famous video artworks by the likes

of [Matthew Barney](#)) on sale for \$3 a pop from [Stefan Bechoam](#), who, along with four other artists, runs **Proyectos Ultravioleta** in Guatemala.

Flanking the scrappy container village were the sizable booths of two veteran Circa exhibitors, San Juan's [Walter Otero](#) and Costa Rica's [Jacob Karpio](#), both of whom have long histories developing collections on the island. Otero, who for many years had a gallery in San Juan and was on Circa's selection committee for its first four editions, now deals privately, and serves as adviser to collector **Horacio Campolietto**. At this year's Circa, Otero had success with several Puerto Rican artists who have already found favor with local collectors. He sold a recent painting of a silver candelabra by young Puerto Rican-born, New York-based artist [Angel Otero](#) (no relation to the dealer) for \$8,000. Visitors to Miami last December will remember Otero as a break-out success at the **Nada Art Fair**, where he showed with Chicago's **Kavi Gupta**.

Walter Otero also parted with a neon text piece in an edition of three, by [Michael Linares](#), priced at \$6,000; **Alberto de la Cruz**, among others, owns Linares' work. He also sold *Rangers Lead the Way*, a new figurative painting with an Op-art-like pixellated effect, by [Axel Ruiz](#), for \$7,000, and a group of whimsical, playing card-size paintings of cartoonish extraterrestrial heads, from a series called "Loneliness," by **Rabindranath Diaz**, for a very reasonable \$1,500. All of these artworks went to Puerto Rican collectors. Otero says although the fair is smaller now, the quality has remained high; he praises Circa for leaning towards cutting edge art, and for rallying local collectors to open their homes.

And yet, if Otero's experience during this fair's first few days is any gauge, the market isn't too hot at the moment. "It's not the best," he laments. Many dealers here say collectors tend to hold off on purchases until the fair's final day, but Otero, being a local (and a friend of many Puerto Rico's collectors) has been on a different schedule. "I used to sell out 75 percent of my booth on the first night," he said. "This year I sold 25 percent." That didn't bode well, and he says the fair could use more collectors from outside Puerto Rico, and better promotion internationally.

For Karpio, who has been coming to Puerto Rico for some 18 years now, working with collectors like **Chiho Andreu**, [Cesar Reyas](#), and Campolietto, Circa has consistently been one of the best fairs in the region. This year, he parted with a painting by Australian artist [Sally Smart](#) for \$42,000, as well as work by two Costa Rican artists, [Priscilla Monge](#) and [Federico Herrero](#). Hanging on an outside wall of Karpio's booth, where it provided a marked contrast to the scrappy container village, was one of the most impressive — and expensive — pieces in Circa, a sprawling 1998 painting by [Fabian Marcaccio](#), priced at \$225,000. it was snapped up by Campolietto.

That costly Marcaccio was the exception here. For the most part the work in this fair stuck in the \$5,000 - \$20,000 price range. In fact, the more reasonably work was priced, it seemed, the better it fared. **Magnan/Metz**, from New York, brought a range of pieces by [Sofia Maldonado](#), a Puerto Rican artist who earned her MFA at New York's **Pratt Institute** and recently made headlines for her upcoming mural project in Times Square, set for completion in March. A graffiti-style painting went for \$6,000, a large drawing for \$3,500, and small plastic store-bought dolls that Maldonado customizes with graffiti-style painting sold before she even got around to the task, at prices ranging from \$350 to \$1,500.

The energetic artist, who planned to show up on the fair's penultimate day to do a live painting set to tunes from a local DJ, also made some customized t-shirts for Magnan's booth, where they flew off the rack at around \$30 a pop. For Maldonado, local support in Puerto Rico hasn't only come in the form of collectors accumulating her work: Alberto de la Cruz commissioned the artist to design a bottle and label for a cappuccino liquor soon to be released by his coffee company, Yaucono.

Previous runaway successes at Circa have gone on to thriving careers, with international representation. Exhibit A is [Melvin Martinez](#), who makes bright, colorful abstract sculptures and thickly impastoed abstract paintings. His work was a big hit at Circa a few years ago, and graces the walls of the Campoliettos and others. He is now represented by powerful Paris and New York dealer [Yvon Lambert](#).

Artists making the rounds of Circa weighed in on the challenges facing the local talent. "We're the oldest colony in the Western Hemisphere and that puts us in an uneven position, and it can be difficult for us to project ourselves outside the island," mid-career painter [Antonio Martorell](#) observed. "We do it, but without the methods available to other nations."

Martorell's gallery, **Puerto Rico Fine Arts**, which opened a year and a half ago in Ponce, the island's second largest city, was doing Circa for the first time and had already sold one of his paintings, entitled *Black Friday Now*, to a Puerto Rican collector, for \$18,000. "The fair is smaller than in previous years, but we're happy with the feedback we've been getting," says dealer [Rolando Jimenez](#), quickly adding that "the hardcore collectors here would like Circa to be more international than local."

That statement is borne out by the support these collectors show for out-of-towners. "The collectors are good here because they support you by buying. That's what support means!" says [Christa Schuebbe](#), whose Dusseldorf gallery, **Schuebbe Projects**, has been finding success at Circa since the fair's first edition. The star of her booth this year was young German artist [Christian Schoeler](#), whose moody, soft-focus figurative paintings recall [Elizabeth Peyton](#) and [Paul P.](#) Priced between \$4,500 and \$8,000, one had sold and three were on reserve by the fair's second day. Perhaps in an effort to lure in local fashionistas or just to add a bit of glamor to the proceedings, Schuebbe had affixed next to Scholer's paintings photocopied images of a bag the artist just completed for **Louis Vuitton**.

Across the aisle from Schuebbe, **Galeria Casas Riegner**, from Bogota, brought some of the fair's edgier, more conceptual artworks. Standouts were ink-on-paper drawings of newspaper pages with lines crossed out — a comment on censorship — by [Johanna Calle](#), and **Icaro Zorbar**'s "Suicide Various Mix Tapes," a series of strange little sculptures made from cassette tapes and pencils. By rotating the pencils that are stuck in the cassettes' two holes you could scroll through song lyrics, such as Nine Inch Nails' "everyone I know goes away in the end," that are etched into the tape material and viewable through tiny apertures. Casas Riegner has participated in Circa from the beginning, finding fans among more adventurous collectors like [John Belk](#) and **Diana & Moisés Berezdivin**, who currently have work by **Johanna Calle** on view in a group show in their San Juan exhibition space, **Espacio 1414**.

Interest in art is seeping beyond the confines of museums, collectors homes, and art spaces here. At a dinner during Circa, hosted by property developer [Friedrich Stubbe](#) and his wife, Carolina, Stubbe averred, "I'm the CEO of a development company. Our business is the creation of theaters for people to pursue happiness. Art is one of the instruments to pursue happiness." Stubbe, along with a group of local investors, will shortly open a six-star Ritz Carlton hotel on Puerto Rican land formerly owned by the **Rockefeller** family. When it opens, the hotel is likely to be stocked with art.

As much of a discrepancy as there seems to be between what the core group of Puerto Rican collectors buy and what their hometown fair tends to show, one would be hard-pressed to get any of them to say a bad word about Circa. Case in point, **Jose Alvarez**, whose home is stocked with some outstanding **Guyton/Walker** pieces, a cache of [Jonathan Meeses](#), and a show-stopping [Rachel Harrison](#) sculpture (and who just bought a new [Dana Schutz](#) painting) emailed along the following anecdote, worth quoting in full:

"During one of the "Celebration of Circa" dinners hosted at Rosalía & Humberto Ugobono's home, showcasing their extraordinary collection, [Moises Berezdivin](#) a pioneer art collector from Puerto Rico commented, while enjoying the evening, 'What an amazing thing has happened right in front of our eyes, the development of Circa during the last few years has turned us into an important international contemporary art venue.' While saying this, he was looking around proudly at a group of 50 world class international collectors, museum directors and curators, gallery owners and journalists. Circa is an important validation of Moises and his wife Diana's work of international art collecting during the last 30 years. I feel exactly the same way. Circa has become an important project that has put all of us in Puerto Rico in the mainstream of international contemporary art."

Clearly there is local pride. Take collector Alberto de la Cruz. Standing between a **Neo Rauch** painting he commissioned — it includes an image of a stack of soda cans, in honor of de la Cruz's ownership of the local Coca Cola concern — and a mammoth **Sigmar Polke** painting that required a crane, twenty workers, and the removal of a wall to get into his 20th floor apartment, this ambitious collector had nothing but encouraging words for Circa, despite having taste that runs to artists absent from the fair, like [Dana Shutz](#), [Martin Kippenberger](#), and Peter Doig (whose 1999 portrait of his dealer [Gavin Brown](#) swimming hangs, rather amusingly, in a bathroom). "I like the way it turned out," he said. "Artists' works can really stand out — everyone sees them. Were we able to promote young artists? Did it look good? That's what I see in these things. And the community embraced it. More houses open here than for any other fair."

Still, Circa's owner [Roberto Nieves](#) knows he can't rely only on local interest to keep his fair relevant. With co-artistic director [Paco Barragan](#), who has scouted galleries for the fair since its inception, moving into an advisory role, Nieves says he is looking to hire someone to do outreach with buyers. "Our first goal is more collectors," he says. "We have a lot of things to offer in Puerto Rico, and people need to know about us."

Perhaps in the global art world ecosystem, art fairs always eventually find their place, though not perhaps an obvious one. Flash back to **Stefan Bechoam**, the young Guatemalan artist hawking his pirated video art in Circa's container village. By the second to last day of the fair, his supply

of product has dwindled. He'd even put together a crude sign announcing the low \$3 price, the better to seduce buyers. Asked how things were going, he eyed his shrinking pile of disks, and quipped, "My goal is to leave here and be able to say I'm the guy who sold the most, and made the least." He jokes now, but, with the de la Cruzes, Campoliettos, Berezdivins, and Alvarazes of this island wandering into his shipping container, maybe remembering something, then going out onto the Venice/Basel/New York/Miami/London circuit and mentioning it to an American collector (or a Swiss curator, or a French dealer), well, in the word-of-mouth, butterfly-flaps-its-wings ways of the art world, there is always the possibility he could one day find himself in a different position: as one of those blue-chip artists who sell the least, but make the most.