

Franklin Sirmans on Curating, Collecting, and Community in the Art World

Museum director Franklin Sirmans is on a mission to make contemporary art a medium for community-building. 11.29.2021 by Kat Herriman



By Kat Herriman
Photography Jade Lilly

Since becoming the director of Miami's Jorge M. Pérez Art Museum (PAMM) in October of 2015, Franklin Sirmans has exponentially grown the museum's endowment, making PAMM an international destination as well as the de facto hub for Caribbean and Latinx diaspora contemporary art studies. Helping to hone the collection's mission and expand its fiscal support network and its strategic grassroots collaborations, Sirmans has unified a city of competing interests into one community.

This is no easy task in an era when museums and cultural nonprofits face their most acute inflection point in recent history, due to the public's renewed pledge to see collections decolonized, staff unionized, board systems interrogated, and sustainability and accessibility taken seriously. But Sirmans, who during his illustrious career has been a critic, editor, scholar, and curator—including at The Menil Collection in Houston and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)—is someone who can thoughtfully see all sides. As the artist Teresita Fernández, who has exhibited at PAMM, explains, "Franklin understands that museums are about people, and that visual culture and social change are inextricably linked. His authentic relationships with artists internationally are a testament to how true museum leadership is built on meaningful connections that inspire trust."



"Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael," 1987, by George Segal

L'OFFICIEL: What made you excited to move to Miami?

FRANKLIN SIRMANS: I grew up in New York, but I used to go to Miami and the Caribbean, visiting friends and family. I did an exhibition in 2008 that I felt had to come to Miami because of its subject matter, which was this show, NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith at their Menil Collection. That whole show was based on, in a broad sense, contemporary art and spirituality, but it was specific to only the Americas. In a way, to provide a territorial rule for yourself, but also to suggest that what happens here is completely unique in terms of the after effects of slavery and middle passages. And then in a religious sense, not synergy, but what happens when religion that's used by Europeans to enslave people is then met with a form of resistance from native culture. Basically, you get Candomblé in Brazil, you get Voodoo in Haiti, you get Santería in Cuba, Miami is an exciting, incredible place to come to where you have a very different public than you would in other cities

L'O: How has your role changed in the city over your tenure, and what are you focused on now?

FS: Amongst other institutions, we've always been what we would call the flagship. We want all boats to rise together; we're trying to be part of a leadership team, along with our civic leaders, that highlights Miami as a place where the arts are not just supported, but cherished and valued in a way that could potentially be available for all. When our museum opened in 1984, it was run by a European director, Jan Vandermark, who had experienced working in the Midwest at big institutions like the MCA Chicago and the Dia. He came to Miami and there weren't exactly collectors at that point in time who were willing to support the creation of a new museum.

The first thing he did was a show that brought in works from 50 different museums across the country. And six months before the museum opened, he mounted Jean-Claude and Christo's "Surrounded Islands," and it was all about getting people to work together, especially at a time when they really weren't doing so. The city was known for drugs, violence, and immigration. It was a very transitional and difficult moment, and one that *Time Magazine* would call "Paradise Lost." But it was really the beginning of something amazing. With that backdrop, we're in this position where we can spread the gospel of art. If you're walking through the streets of Wynwood, then you should be equally at home in our museum. Our goal is to provide a space for education and entertainment through visual art.



"Sediment," 2012, by Jeff Sonhouse

L'O: You revisited the “Surrounded Islands” project recently for an anniversary. What was it like going back into that, and seeing all the progress the city and the institution have made since?

FS: The museum opened in 1984 as the Center for Fine Arts and was renamed the Miami Art Museum in 1994. At that time we had an amazing director, Susanne Delahanty. Then I think we had the right director to make our incredible building, Terry Riley, who was not only an architect, but the head of architecture at MoMA. My predecessor, Thom Collins, came in with experience to get things moving in a difficult environment. Then, there's me, with a mission to really double down on where we have come from and to lead the international conversation in contemporary art pertaining to Latin America and the Caribbean, and even looking across the Atlantic.

This is something that I think we should naturally be one of the best at, and that's what we've been trying to bring to the fore in these past few years. We had a fund for Black art that started when the building opened in 2013, and we bought some amazing works. Then we said, “Wait a minute, we have incredible people here, we have the opportunity to do something really special.” We turned it into an endowed fund with the help of the Knight Foundation. We've also created a Latin American and Latinx art fund. In the coming year alone, we're doing exhibitions with Marisol, Cruz-Diez, and Hélio Oiticica, and with Mariano from Cuba.

L'O: Is the collecting aspect of the institution something that is of particular interest to you?

FS: Yes, big time. Coming from somebody who worked in journalism and as an independent curator for several years, the first thing of getting into a space like that of the Menil was how we work with the collection. I find that incredibly exciting because it's not just about the current moment, but also about what we're leaving behind for generations to come. We're able to do things thematically and tell stories that we were not able to do so readily or so easily before.

When we reopened here in the challenging time of COVID-19, we had allied with PowerUP, which is a celebration of the African diaspora through donations from Jorge Pérez. A month later we opened a show called *My Body, My Rules* by Jen Ignacio that featured all women. Next was the show *The Artist as Poet*, which focused on the context of text and its relationship to contemporary art. We've put ourselves in a position via the collection to lead the conversation of who we are in terms of mission and vision.

L'O: As a curator you are wearing a million different hats, from researcher to producer to financier. There are very few people who go into curatorial work wanting to wear all of those hats. What drew you to the profession, and how have you managed to embrace all the roles that come with it?



FS: From a very cliché, very romantic point of view, I was just as interested in writing poetry and writing criticism. In fact, my first job was in the publications department of the Dia Art Foundation, not in curatorial. Then I worked for Flash Art in Italy and taught criticism as well. The idea of creating visual objects-based essays, in a way, is how I came to curating. I guess from that almost romantic view of Frank O'Hara—you're writing and you're making shows at the same time.

L'O: You have a reputation based on a very hands-on community approach, and you've carved out a position in the city as a facilitator. Can you ever see yourself leaving Miami? How would you try to translate that energy into another city?

FS: The future we would like to see in museums—the future that has been pushed because of George Floyd—is museums that have a relationship to community that is a little bit different than it has been in the past. One that is stronger and more engaged in a conversation with potential audiences, and allowing those dialogues to actually influence the way we go about things.

What we're trying to do right now is just collaborate, collaborate, collaborate, especially with organizations that are smaller and more nimble, and probably more deeply enmeshed in actual social change. That's part of what we do, but we can't do it as well as they can. But we can be a great collaborator and focal point for people to come to know more about those organizations. One of the things I like about being

here is that it's the Pérez Art Museum of Miami-Dade County. We are directly tied to our government, for better or worse. That means we're working for the people who pay the taxes, and that's built into our mission.



“Double Dutch,” 1981/2010, by John Ahearn in collaboration with Rigoberto Torres

L'O: How do you make artists into your allies?

FS: It's maintaining a generosity of time and spirit in engaging with an artist's work and ideas in the context of not only art history, but also of the current moment. That's part of the give-and-take between a curator and an artist. That, I miss a little bit, but I also never will give it up completely. I go to a studio every now and then, and try to maintain that aspect of the job even as a director.

L'O: What legacy do you hope to leave behind?

FS: Most importantly, in a general sense, to leave things in a better place—literally by continuing to grow the collection with quantity over quality, which is going to become paramount. We have to think about, “When is enough, enough? How do we deal with

the issues of storage and accumulation along with planning the collection, but also being able to speak to contemporary society?” Hopefully, we leave the museum in a better position to answer that. Can we leave some wiggle room by creating a much bigger endowment? That would be nice, and that’s something that I would like to be able to leave behind, especially if we’ve cultivated a group of people from different backgrounds that hold the museum dear. I just want to keep growing so that we are a mirror of not only this city, but also of something that could be an example of how people live together well, with the museum at its core.