

# Un-Lost in Miami

**MICHELLE WEINBERG**

BY MIKE CARROLL

Michelle Weinberg's ties to Provincetown run deep. She worked here from 1993 to 1998. She was a fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in 1993 and the Visual Arts Program Coordinator the following year. Her son, Maximo, was born here in 1994. One of the first artists asked to exhibit at the then-new DNA Gallery, she also showed work at the Schoolhouse Galleries and at the Hudson D. Walker Gallery at the Work Center. She produced a memorable piece called *Instant Opera—Playful Physics*, which was shown at Berta Walker's West Window Gallery. However, Weinberg's life began far from the shores of the Cape. She was born in Brooklyn, grew up in White Plains, New York, and went to school in Manhattan. She received her BFA from the School of Visual Arts in NYC and her MFA from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia.

Since her residency in Provincetown, Weinberg has found roots on a new shore, Miami. I wanted to find out why she had traveled from the Outer Cape and what these past eight years have been like. So I drove to Miami Beach on a bright sunny winter morning and found her at her home near Biscayne Bay. A metal grate opened at her front door, revealing a spacious apartment reconfigured to become like a loft or factory—a factory for living, I thought. I was taken by how the colors, space, light, furniture, and flow of the place lent the experience of being inside one of the many collages and paintings I have seen her produce over the past decade. I felt a little disoriented from the encounter. Weinberg and I have worked together on some projects and exhibitions in Provincetown, so it was natural to start my questions there. I asked her about the experience of leaving Provincetown, and what her life had been like since then.

"I needed to make a living. In Provincetown we seemed to live on air. I remember wonderful people helping me raise Maximo, but I couldn't have made a proper living. Also, I wanted to be in a larger community of artists. In Miami the community is active, but I miss the talented writers I knew in Provincetown."

Her current work is infused with more industrial imagery, drawn from her present surroundings. Language and text is present, including more Latin words and phrases. Everywhere in Miami Beach are pilings, foundations, demolitions and ads, ads, ads for the luxurious lifestyle that awaits you as a new property owner in the city on the beach. It is an easy, sexy place where the streets are organized on a grid, like New York. Like the bridges to Brooklyn, three bridges span Biscayne Bay and run between Miami Beach, the new Wynwood Art District, and the Design District just to the east.

In Miami, English can be heard less than Spanish at times, and the sultry combined Latin, European, and North American youth cultures create a sense of theater that seems more natural than not.

There is a gamey tension to the place, and a dizziness that comes with a combined self-proclaimed expertise and buoyant optimism cooked together in the Florida sun. Everyone is on the go. Mostly there is a sense something is happening here, and that you can have something to do with it.

There are several small museums in the Miami area, as there are throughout South Florida, but the local art scene is driven by a handful of private collectors who have renovated warehouse spaces and

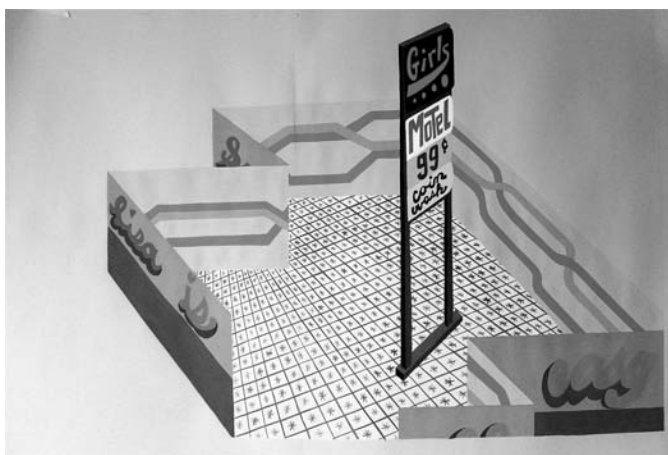
kept their collections on display for the general public. These collections offer one answer to the questions raised when art pushes a space from private to public and retains characteristics of both situations. Galleries, museums, and artists' studios are some of the few places where these concepts collide, provoking new thought. Art spaces, despite art's function as elite currency, have become vital as places where truly democratic value systems flourish, driven by a variety of goals that do not exclude profit and gain, but include a great deal more. Art galleries invite non-buyers to visit and look at their products without implicit suggestion to purchase. Feedback is as welcome as sales.

In Miami these collections occupy a gap between private homes and art institutions, which is also filled with a cascade of private commissions conceived through partnerships with architects, designers, and artists that are filling the seemingly endless construction of the city's skyline. This heady environment of color and chance seems perfectly suited for Weinberg's ideas to flourish. I have seen her work installed in art fairs, in galleries, and, recently, as a large public project, an 8-by-28-foot glass mosaic titled *Paseo*, installed in conjunction with Art Basel/Miami 2005.

Miami's best known art event, Art Basel Miami Beach is a world-class fair that takes place



REVOLUTION INSIDE, 2005, LATEX, ACRYLIC, GOUACHE ON PAPER, 180 BY 90 INCHES

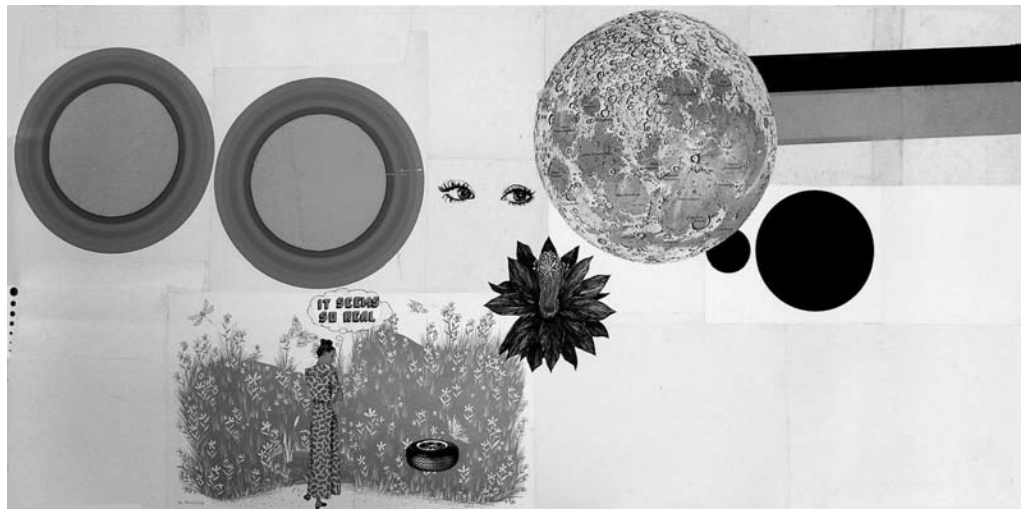


SWEET LISA, 2006, GOUACHE ON PAPER, 35 BY 60 INCHES

each December. Modeled after the Art Basel fair in Switzerland, it was conceived in 2001 as a city-wide event designed to include the area's museums, galleries, and collections. The 2002 fair brought approximately 30,000 visitors from around the world. Each year the show has exceeded its prior performance, with crowds this year reaching as many as 40,000 visitors. During the fair, air traffic is backed up as private jets fly collectors in for private viewings. Buses take visitors from the main fair to Wynwood and a wash of special installations, satellite fairs, and events thrown by the local arts community in galleries and other art spaces.

During her first years in Miami, Michelle returned frequently to New York and Boston. She continues to teach, specializing in art programs for high school students. She tells me, "If I was never able to make art again I would continue this work, which focuses on the ability of kids to communicate effectively in family systems, and for the whole family to recognize how important that is." Her pictures address these issues, depicting effective systems for looking, thinking, and living. Michelle also writes about art, contributing columns to the *Miami New Times* and *SunPost*.

When I first encountered Weinberg's work, it was in a small gallery in Provincetown. I saw a large wall-sized unstretched canvas depicting a domestic scene—a kitchen I think, with a bottle of bleach. Parts of me responded to her distinct way of thinking about pictures. The paint was applied skillfully but in an apparently workmanlike manner. Nothing was extra, but nothing was missing in its result.



BETRAYED BY NATURE, 2005, PAPER COLLAGE, 21 BY 42 INCHES

Weinberg's work, never sentimental or cynical, can be cryptic. She never dips into kitsch, but sometimes flirts with it. Her choice to use collage as a medium seems to have little to do with giving new life to discarded objects, so she avoids the relative moralities that can grow from that. Instead, the work exudes a confidence born from the sense that she has found the best use for her materials that they will ever have. One feels that the decisions she makes within the picture are fast, and completely correct.

She makes flat areas and shapes that can be dynamic, poetic, political, and humorous. She is drawn to abstract spaces, nonluminous and off-kilter, where she uses hyper-real visuals like an

abstract painter uses mark and tone. Favorite subjects include furniture; language; words in thought balloons; chains of flowers; signs; modernist shapes like curves, arrows, and bubbles; and lines that subtly define an inside from an apparently endless outside space, her homage to the impossible landscape. The combination of skillful intellect and joyful expression is the heart of Weinberg's talent. Found paper images and colors offer her a comprehensive visual language from which she can approach any subject. By choosing existing materials and painting unspectacular environments (like roadside billboards) she engages us with the familiar. "Some of the collages are instructional diagrams for inhabiting esoteric or ambiguous states of being," she says. "Others are fables of social life—consumer obsessions, love and sex, nature, technology, laundry, poetry, theater, and garbage. Occasionally, autobiographical events seep in; this adds an element of realism. Each work is a page from an endless manuscript, a stage set from an opera, or a still frame from an animation."

These specific visual elements are used in clever interaction to create a powerful sense of place and time. Weinberg's work has a way of causing the viewer to seem to remember the present; to be an involved witness. Suddenly, we are part of the theater of experience that is enacted upon looking at her images. Sometimes she will place a directional arrow or chain of flowers in the exact spot that so many others would paint around in order to create a more complex and self-aggrandizing solution. I love this and it makes me laugh, as it has the same effect as someone giving you much simpler driving directions to your destination. It's like getting un-lost.

I still remember that bottle of bleach in the kitchen image. The very ordinariness of the scene depicted was invigorating. But Weinberg does not preach that art need be about the everyday, instead proving that the mundane can include, encompass, and inspire grand design and high opera.

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