

THE  TIMES

27.11.04

**THE SUGAR
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GORDON RAMSAY'S
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EXTRAVAGANZA

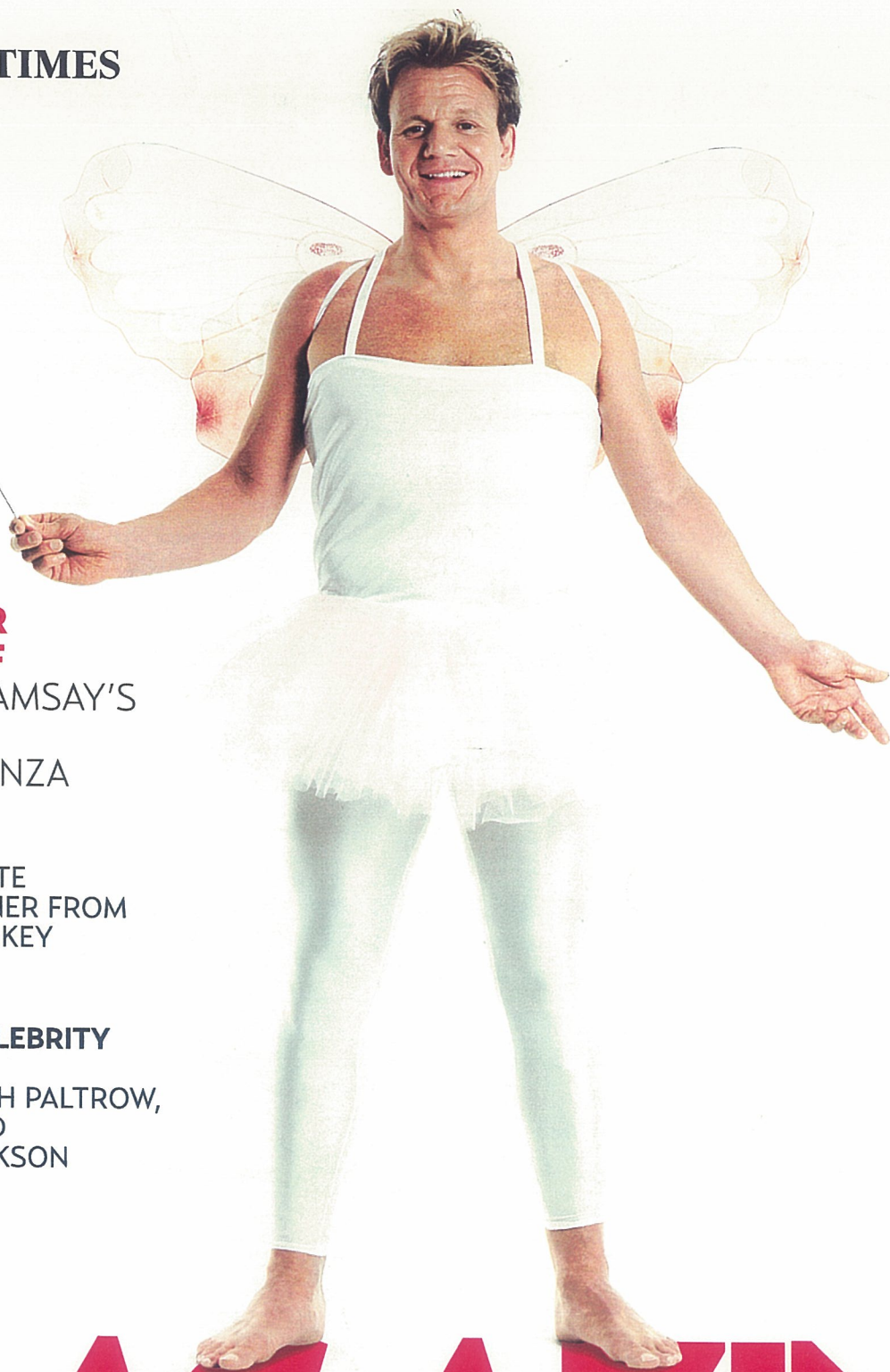
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CRAIG ROBINS

OCEAN DRIVE

Next week, some of the world's coolest people will descend on Miami, as the city once awash with musclemen, models and retirees turns artworld mecca. And it's thanks to one man, property developer turned cultural impresario Craig Robins

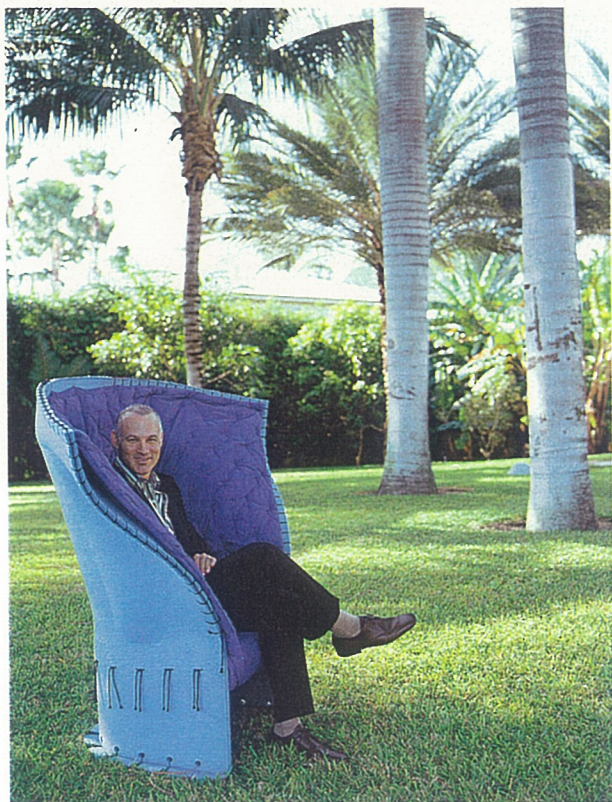
REPORT JEFFREY PODOLSKY PHOTOGRAPHS PAUL MASSEY

More than 15,000 revellers, ranging from local hip-hop kids and the mayor of Miami to such famed artists as Kenny Scharf and Robert Rauschenberg, have descended upon Miami's design district, where art of a particular piquancy is on vivid, universal display. They're all here to celebrate Miami Art Basel, which in just three years has become a mecca for the international art community. Amid the fanfare stands a soft-spoken, 41-year-old real-estate developer, dressed in a black velvet suit and with short salt-and-pepper hair, whose compact frame resembles that of a featherweight boxer. Surveying the scene with his voluptuous, Cuban-born ex-wife, Ivelin, a 34-year-old former model, and their 13-year-old daughter, Zoe, he greets countless well-wishers with a jovial "Hola! Qué pasa! Hey, man, how ya doin'?" until an unenlightened gent – evidently new to the scene – asks him what he does for a living. "I work in the neighbourhood," replies Craig Robins.

Correction: Craig Robins owns the neighbourhood; 18 blocks of the design world's premier showrooms – such as Knoll, Holly Hunt, Waterworks – exhibiting a panoply of contemporary art, some from his own extensive collection. "It's phenomenal," says London art dealer Tim Taylor, who wishes he'd brought along his wife, Lady Helen Windsor, and their children. "It's like the Notting Hill carnival."

To the paparazzi's delight, Robins – who is clearly *bien dans sa peau* – is treating actress Marisa Tomei to a private tour of an exhibition inside a cavernous, 19th-century former knitting factory, which, of course, he owns. "What a great night for Miami," says an immensely self-satisfied Robins, snapping his fingers to the hip-hop DJ while sipping a glass of red wine. "You can feel the vibe on the street. I'm so happy. The neighbourhood is a creative laboratory of merging art and design," he adds, using one of his favourite phrases.

The evening's festivities are no mere experiment, however. They bear triumphant testimony to Robins' relentless quest to transform Miami from the sun-soaked Sodom of popular perception to a city of cultural substance. "People look at Miami differently now," says Art Basel's director Sam Keller. "The art world loves to >>



'CRAIG'S STORY IS LIKE THE STORY OF MIAMI. HE'S A MICROCOSM OF WHAT'S HAPPENING'

<< come here. You can go for a swim and come back to the Fair to buy first-rate art. I can work here in my swimming suit." That was the scene a year ago, but you can be sure there will be as many, if not even more, key artworld players in Florida next week, for the third Miami Art Basel event.

In Miami Beach, the pleasure principle has been honed to an art form, and South Beach – littered throughout the winter with steroid-enhanced hunks and sleek sirens in thong bikinis and diamanté sandals – remains the Art Deco epicentre of hedonism. But the thought of a sophisticated, cultural Miami Beach is something of an oxymoron. Never mind that Miami boasts some of the world's most acquisitive art collectors, an international jet-set of South American buyers and a trove of museums. With the influx every December of hundreds of blue-chip art dealers and collectors from around the globe, the week-long Miami Art Basel becomes a fun-filled, wheeling-dealing art-fest where pasty-skinned dealers lounge by the hip pool at Andre Balazs's new Raleigh Hotel, sipping mojitos, and boasting of the latest Cindy Sherman sale, which they clinched for thousands of dollars.

Previous page: Craig Robins in Miami's "design district". This page, clockwise from top left: in the garden of his home; with his daughter and ex-wife at a photographic exhibition; studying a model of the Aqua complex with artist Alison Jackson



A major force behind Art Basel's decision to set up shop in Miami Beach as its second locale, Robins amassed a fortune by developing the Art Deco boutique hotels that dot South Beach. He then turned his attention to creating the "design district", a chic, egalitarian alternative to the high-rise design centres in New York and Los Angeles, prompting *The New York Times* to exclaim, "Come on down for a tan and sofa."

"Without him, all this – the design district, Miami Art Basel – wouldn't exist now," says Cathy Laff, director of the city's Wolfsonian Gallery. "Miami has always been about people exploiting the city, and Craig is really the first person who had a vision which wasn't self-serving. People mostly come and colonise the city. Craig adds value to the community. It's unusual for someone so young to be so focused, and almost reshape the image of the city. There's no one like him. It's not just about making money. It's about building a community with culture."

"Telling his story is like telling the new story of Miami Beach," says New York financier Nicolas Berggruen, the son of Parisian art dealer Heinz Berggruen. "He's like a microcosm of what's >>

CRAIG ROBINS



'I BELIEVE IN WHAT I'M DOING: NURTURING CREATIVE PEOPLE. IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT MONEY'

<< happening here – a young, edgy generation, which couples design with style.” Or, as Manhattan artist and socialite Ahn Duong puts it, “Craig is the epitome of the new Miami, merging culture and art.”

Now Robins hopes people will embrace his latest creative venture, Aqua, a new development project he has built on a sliver of a Miami Beach island, which – unlike much of Miami, with its suburban sprawl and nameless shopping malls – emphasises a pedestrian-friendly community, where residents need never hop into their cars to fetch a tube of toothpaste. The day after his design district blow-out, Robins, along with *ArtReview*, hosts a champagne brunch in which artists such as Alison Jackson, dealers like Andrew Kalman and critics such as Louisa Buck are ferried in golf carts by men in hard-hats through the construction site for his Utopian village. Ever the savvy businessman, Robins has lured the international art community to view a spectacular model of Aqua, which has just opened. But, at the moment, the arty crowd takes a back seat as he shrewdly coaxes an older woman into purchasing a \$1.5 million, three-bedroom condo which she's thinking of giving as a present to her husband.

Robins knows how to channel his energy. When not holding court at Miami's vast exhibition

hall, where a gathering of more than 160 dealers can be heard hawking their wares, Art Basel Miami – unlike its dour Swiss counterpart – metamorphoses into a scintillating succession of glamorous soirées. A couple of nights earlier, Robins skipped his pal Lenny Kravitz's party at the Shore Club and dropped in briefly at a Brooke de Ocampo dinner for Rob Hersov's Net Jet at Gianni Versace's former mansion – which attracted the likes of glitzy couple Avery Agnelli and John Frieda and American heiress Marjorie Gubelman – so that he could quietly dine with Marisa Tomei. “I'm, like, laid-back,” says Robins, despite the constantly vibrating cellphone. “I like to stay put and see what's happening.”

But don't let the mellow veneer fool you. “He's a ruthless, tough businessman,” says Aqua architect Allison Spear. “Good,” says Robins in response to Spear's merciless description. “A lot of people think I'm tough, but, after all, I am a real-estate developer. The problem is, that has a lot of negative connotations. I'm trying to eliminate that reputation. I'm tough if I have to be, but I really believe in what I'm doing: nurturing and facilitating creative people. To me, it's not about how much money I make on a certain project.”

All of which may sound a tad Pollyanna-ish for someone who's been so successful in the cut-throat world of Miami monopoly. After all, real-estate is in his roots, and Robins, who comes from a privileged background, could easily have followed in the strictly commercial footsteps of his developer father. While attending the University of Michigan, however, he spent a semester in Spain, where he had something of an epiphany.

“I would sit in the Prado for, y'know, several hours a day, and I started to teach myself art,” he recalls. “I got hooked.” Robins returned to Miami armed with a love of Goya – and a Salvador Dalí sketch that his parents gave him as a graduation gift in lieu of a \$10,000 gold Rolex. After graduating from the University of Miami law school in 1987, Robins found that he was “unsuited to becoming a lawyer” and “keen on becoming an art dealer, but that was totally impractical in Miami at the time”. With a little help from dad, he eventually became partners with Chris Blackwell, the music impresario who discovered Bob Marley. Together, they carved out a niche that placed them squarely in the forefront of the business of developing chic boutique hotels out of run-down Art Deco gems which, until the Eighties, had been dilapidated retirement homes.

This unlikely pair were among the first to realise the potential of South Beach, painting their properties in cool, pastel hues with spare, stylish interiors. At one point, they owned five of the hottest hotels, including the Tides and the Marlin, whose grand opening featured U2. And, Robins says, “Naomi and Kate and Christie” came down, too. The Marlin also housed the new Miami offices of Elite Models, as well as a recording studio.

“Chris was like a mentor in my life,” Robins reflects. “I was always interested in art and design, but he really taught me – with all the creative people from art, film and music around him – how to market creativity and approach real estate that way.” Robins eventually sold his interests in that enterprise (of his other holdings, Diesel Jeans founder Renzo Rosso bought the Carlisle, and Gloria Estefan purchased the Cardoza). And while he bemoans the fact that South Beach is “no longer this fun little hip place where all you see are beautiful models, actors and artists”, he did walk away with enough cash to strike out on his own and set his sights on creating Miami's design district, a ten-minute drive from the beach.

Not unlike Miami Art Basel, which has put the city on the map culturally, the design district – of which Robins owns a million square feet in 35 buildings – now attracts major interior designers from New York and beyond. Among the 20 top design firms, they'll also discover the headquarters of the Latin Grammys, >>

Artworks in Craig Robins' Mediterranean-style Miami home

CRAIG ROBINS

<< a hip-hop jeweller selling bling-bling, the trendy restaurant Grass, plus Robins' imprint of commissioning artists to embellish the neighbourhood by painting murals on the façades of its buildings (including an enormous outdoor living room with flowery wallpaper, two towering lamps and a Schiaparelli-like, shocking-pink sofa).

Robins' vast collection of hundreds of pieces of contemporary art – ranging from a recently purchased \$320,000 Marcel Duchamp to a Chris Ofili piece composed of “cow dung, no, elephant dung. I have to get my shit straight”, says Robins – is stored in warehouses and rotated on a regular basis in extemporaneous galleries in the design district (until the spaces find occupants); in his Mediterranean-style home, with its monumental Kenny Scharf sculpture (a wedding present from the artist) and works by David Hammons and Elizabeth Peyton; and in his company offices, the walls are lined with diverse pieces by John Currin, Marlene Dumas, Francis Alys, Franz Ackerman, and even a Picasso.

Instead of concentrating on a single structure, Robins tries to infuse the entire neighbourhood with a creative thrust that centres on design, art and architecture, and a sensitivity to human-scale considerations. It is this philosophy that he hopes the tenants of Aqua will appreciate. A private, gated island of three mid-rise buildings and 46 townhouses (ranging in price from \$700,000 to \$7 million for a three-bedroom flat and bearing the design stamp of ten different architects), the \$225-million development is a bold affront to the nearby canyon of high-rise condominiums and hotels that line Miami Beach – and which block any view of (or access to) the ocean from the beach's main strip, Collins Avenue. Modelled on the European tradition of town planning (dubbed “new urbanism”), in which residents can walk

to the nearby food emporium or café, Aqua is also unique in that home-owners will be able to see the surrounding creek – hence the name Aqua – from every vantage. And, of course, there will be public art: a huge mural by one of Robins' favourite artists, Richard Tuttle, and a semi-abstract mosaic by the Argentine artist Guillermo Kuitca. “We're not imitating anything that's been done anywhere else,” says Robins – although there are a couple of other new urbanist communities in Florida, based on 19th-century architecture. “This is a whole new neighbourhood we're building.”

It's little wonder that Art Basel's Keller describes Robins as a “real mover”, whom he credits with persuading Miami Beach politicians to host the art fair – not to mention “a passionate collector who goes around the world in search of new artists, not only for his private collection, but because he knows the power of art in developing a neighbourhood”. At the relatively youthful age of 41, Robins appears to have fashioned for himself a charmed life, the bedrock of which is an obsession with the arts – a field in which he acknowledges there's “an incredible amount of hype and greed”.

He goes on to say, “A lot of people tend to think of it in terms of a business. I don't have that energy. Collecting art is more than a hobby or a diversion to get your mind off things – for me, it's part of who I am.” In addition to providing the mortar and bricks for Miami's cultural transfiguration (he has a foundation which he hopes to enlist in creating a first-rate art school), Robins owns a publishing company and has plans to branch out into other multimedia projects. “I don't know where life will take me,” he says. “I don't have any rigid plan, but I doubt I'll be on top of some mountain meditating.” ■

Art Basel Miami Beach 2004 runs from December 2-5

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