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Collecting

Swimming in public money: Miami Beach's \$7m sculpture project

Gareth Harris DECEMBER 5 2019

During a visit to the Berlin-based studio of artists Elmgreen & Dragset last year, it was hard to avoid a work in progress. In the corner stood a turquoise sculpture the shape of an inverted “U”, its curved form held in place on two plinths. The work, “Bent Pool”, is a distorted swimming pool that will never contain water. Instead, it forms an archway wide enough for people to pass through, one at a time.

“Bent Pool”, unveiled this week, stands opposite the west entrance of the newly refurbished Miami Beach Convention Center, giving visitors to Art Basel Miami Beach a slice of Florida life, albeit a subverted one. The folded pool fits into the lush landscape — against the backdrop of the Miami Beach Botanical Garden. Some Miamians seem puzzled by the piece, others are embracing it.

The sculpture forms part of a series commissioned by the City of Miami Beach municipality for its Art in Public Places (AIPP) programme. Five other works — by Ellen Harvey, Joseph Kosuth, Joep van Lieshout, Franz Ackermann and Sarah Morris — are already completed. Brandi Reddick, cultural affairs manager with the City of Miami Beach, tells me that there were 524 applicants, 18 of whom made the shortlist and submitted site-specific proposals. Kosuth's

“Located World, Miami Beach” (2019) comprises city names lit up in neon around the convention centre (the closer the city to Miami, the larger the neon letters).

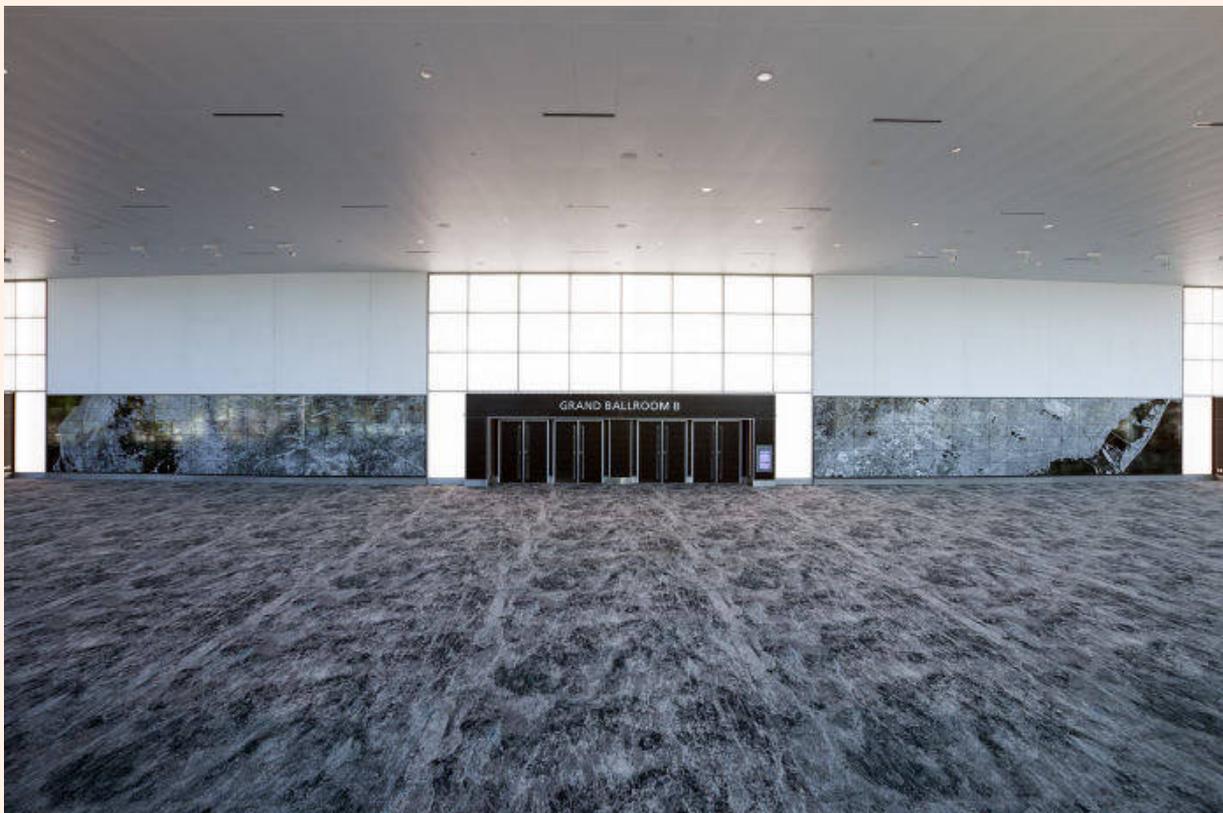
The series of six new sculptures cost \$7m, money which comes from the City of Miami Beach's per-cent-for-art programme, whereby a portion of the budget for city projects and joint public-private initiatives is set aside for public art pieces. The City of Miami Beach founded its Art in Public Places programme in 1984; since its inception, 1.5 per cent of capital costs were allocated for public art.

The total construction cost of the new Miami Beach Convention Center — an extensive, three-year renovation of the 1950s building — is \$620m. The \$7m funding package for the new sculptures stems directly from this capital project. “The budget represents the largest per-cent-

for-art commission by a municipality in US history; this is the largest one-time, curated purchase of works,” Reddick says. In September, the City Commission voted to increase the per-cent-for-art allocation to 2 per cent (such programmes run across more than 20 other US states, but the City of Miami Beach’s new rate is generous; in most states, the allocation is 1 per cent).

Elmgreen & Dragset like their swimming pool motif. In 2016, the Scandinavian pair showed a mammoth swimming pool sculpture, “Van Gogh’s Ear”, at the Rockefeller Centre in New York. “The design [of ‘Bent Pool’] is a reminder that we live in a culture where we often need stand-ins for nature,” Michael Elmgreen says. “Functional pools seem inviting and encourage us to have a good time; the dysfunctional empty pool is more disturbing.”

The piece also touches on a graver issue that will affect all Miamians: climate change and rising sea levels, which threaten to engulf the state over the next half century. “The subtle references to the serious climate change threat is, of course, relevant in an area like Florida. When a city official asked why there was no water in the pool, we could only answer: ‘it’s just a question of time!’” Elmgreen says.



'Atlantis' by Ellen Harvey © Robin Hill

Ellen Harvey's piece "Atlantis" also looks to the environment, inspired by the bodies of water that constitute the local ecosystem. The piece, on show outside the Grand Ballroom in the convention centre, comprises a vast mirror engraved with a white painting depicting a diagonal satellite view of Florida.

"Atlantis" was inspired by a 2009 visit to the 1.5m acre Everglades tropical wetlands, which was organised by the New York-based public art organisation Creative Time and the Everglades Foundation. "The Everglades made a deep impression on me at that time, both because of its scale but also because of its role in filtering the water supply and protecting the land against storm surges," Harvey says.

"When you're in a fair at a convention centre, you tend to lose sight of the outside world. It's a bit like being in a casino... Miami Beach can seem like such a seductive man-made confection of a place, but it is dependent on the ...natural world both for its beauty and for its very existence. I wanted to remind visitors of that connection," she says.

Whether the six new sculptures work in the Miami context is up for debate. Says local artist Adler Guerrie: "I want to applaud the desire for going big [with international artists]. The Kosuth work mirrors many Miamians' sense of belonging to the world."

Ultimately, though, the sculptures are a symbol of Miami's new-found cultural clout. Dan Gelber, mayor of Miami Beach, says: "We love being the centre of the art world [during Art Basel Miami Beach] but we want to be an art and culture destination every day of the year. It's not just a question of rebranding the city but evolving and claiming our space on the international cultural stage. We are more than just a beach."