

Kayne Griffin Corcoran

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An Artist Turns Her Lens on a New Art City: Miami



The filmmaker Dara Friedman at her home in Miami's Coconut Grove. Credit Scott McIntyre for The New York Times.

The premise of Dara Friedman's first film couldn't be simpler. Shot in 1991 on grainy, black and white, silent 16-millimeter film, "DARA I" captures the German-born, Miami-based Ms. Friedman languorously awakening in bed, lighting a cigarette, in no hurry to greet the day. Like Warhol's famed screen tests, it remains compelling, investing its seemingly casual moments with an air of otherworldliness.

The same memorable effect permeates "Dara Friedman: Perfect Stranger," the first career survey of Ms. Friedman's acclaimed experimental films, which opened this month at the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM). "DARA I" is one of 17 works selected by the museum's curator René Morales to demonstrate Ms. Friedman's playful harnessing of cinematic forms.

PAMM is also touting "Perfect Stranger" as a crucial marker for the entire Miami art scene, and not only because it features more exhibition space than the museum has previously devoted to a hometown artist. (Each of Ms. Friedman's films runs simultaneously on its own screen.)

She is one of the city's most internationally exhibited artists, and Franklin Sirmans, the museum's director, writes in the show's catalog that "her trajectory powerfully embodies the possibility that life as an artist in Miami is not just viable, but that the city can serve as an excellent home base for a global artistic career."

Ms. Friedman, now 49, is appreciative — if a bit skeptical about that particular claim. Miami may no longer be an art market backwater, but it's still struggling to solidify its new status as a thriving cultural capital ranking alongside New York and Los Angeles.



Dara Friedman during the installation of her work at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. Credit Scott McIntyre for The New York Times.

"You can make great work in Miami, but selling it here?" Ms. Friedman mused, sitting inside her home in Coconut Grove, southwest of downtown Miami. "I haven't figured that out yet. I don't think the dealers have figured it out yet either."

To that point, while Ms. Friedman is represented by the heavyweight New York gallerist Gavin Brown, she didn't wait around for him to scout South Florida for fresh talent. In 1998, after reading about Mr. Brown, and with \$60 for gas, she drove up to his Manhattan gallery from Miami and convinced him to feature her work in a show, she said. Never mind that cold-calling a top dealer is considered anathema. "It never occurred to me not to do that," she explained. "I didn't even know what I didn't know."

Gut feelings have guided Ms. Friedman's career from the start.

At age 20, she said she talked her way into film classes with the famed avant-garde director Peter Kubelka at Frankfurt's Städelschule art academy without ever formally applying. There she discovered that the school's rigorous focus on casting aside generic film structures was a world away from traditional narrative moviemaking.

"I thought I was just treading water with Kubelka until I got into 'real' film school in New York," Ms. Friedman said of her subsequent acceptance into Columbia University's prestigious graduate filmmaking program. She flashed back on a meeting in a Columbia faculty member's office, receiving an orientation on her coming coursework: "So here I was, living the dream, right?"

Instead, as the professor spoke of crafting screenplays with memorable character arcs, "it all turned my stomach," she said. "I really loved film, but the idea of being trained to make that type of film just made me feel sick. It was like listening to Beethoven in 'A Clockwork Orange' — being driven crazy and tortured by something you once adored."

She excused herself, stepped outside, and vomited. Her body's message was clear: Hollywood — even its indie precincts — was not where she belonged. She immediately flew back to Frankfurt and threw herself into Mr. Kubelka's classes with a new vigor, borrowing cameras, wheedling film stock, and shooting "DARA I."

Her eventual relocation to South Florida in 1992, landing her in Miami Beach when it was still half deserted, was another instinctual move: "It was warm, it was cheap, and there was a good film lab," she remembered. It was also a homecoming of sorts. Ms. Friedman had been raised between West Palm Beach (65 miles north) and Bad Kreuznach, Germany.



Clockwise from top left, details of film stills from "Mother Drum" (2016), "Government Cut Freestyle" (1998), "Bim Bam" (1999), "Total" (1997), "Musical" (2007-2008) and "Rite" (2014).
Credit Courtesy of the artist and Lance Brewer, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York and Rome

"In Germany you would say I was a *besatzungskinder*, a child of the occupation," she explained. Her father, an American who was part of the World War II invasion force, fell in love with Teutonic culture and sank roots. "That's what happens after a war: The winner marries the prettiest girl in town," she added wryly, noting the whispers that followed when a Jewish man from Brooklyn settled down with the daughter of long-established vintners, moving into the sprawling villa that his own country's air force had partially bombed.

The awkwardness surrounding her didn't stop when the family began spending the school year in South Florida, she said: "Jews didn't see me as Jewish, and the Germans didn't see me as German. But that's how you become an artist, you become comfortable with your independent status as neither-nor."

Despite identifying as an outsider, Ms. Friedman has prominently featured greater Miami throughout nearly three decades of her work: Her film "Revolution" (1993-2003) is a meditative walk across South Beach that now serves as a pre-gentrification time capsule; "Government Cut Freestyle" (1998) offers balletic footage of divers launching themselves off a local pier.



Dara Friedman, right, works on the installation of her films with Kevin Arrow and the team at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. Credit Scott McIntyre for The New York Times.

By 2011, when she made “Dancer,” Ms. Friedman and her husband, the sculptor Mark Handforth, and their two teenage daughters had moved from the now-bustling Miami Beach into their current Coconut Grove home — a secluded compound shrouded in tropical greenery, where the loudest neighbors are the wild peacocks that strut around the neighborhood.

But urban life continued to loom large onscreen: “Dancer” showcases 66 different Miamians joyously whipping their bodies down the sidewalks with their own chosen moves — sometimes twerking, sometimes tumbling, tap dancing or tangoing. The end result is equal parts ode to the simple joys of kinetic movement and a celebration of Miami’s dizzying cultural diversity.

So, 25 years after she first arrived, how does Ms. Friedman judge the notion that Miami has finally become a “viable” terrain for artists?

“That feeling of being hungry, that hasn’t changed for me,” she said. “You can’t just grow your potatoes and then sit in the field. You need to take those potatoes to market — you’ve got to hustle!”

Her work is in prominent private and public collections, from Miami’s Rubell family to New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Does she still feel as hungry as the day she audaciously turned up on Gavin Brown’s gallery doorstep?

“Do I still feel hungry?” she repeated incredulously. With a laugh she thundered: “I’m still starving! Except that now I’m a more seasoned hunter.”

— Brett Sokol