Artistic Pulse

There's nothing shy about Miami's art scene. Bold, contemporary, in-your-face murals, sculptures and installations let you know that this is not a slice of the traditional art world. Delving into Miami's artistic landscape means experiencing a couple of musts. One is a stay at South Beach's Sagamore Hotel (sagamorehotel.com), the "Art Hotel" touted as a hot spot for art aficionados and glitterati during Art Basel, the city's premier international art fair. And Art Miami, a high-energy art gathering. The fairs come to town from Nov. 30 to Dec. 4. The other must is a visit to the Wynwood Arts District.>>

STORY SUSAN FRIEDMAN PHOTOGRAPHY AMY MIKLER
We meander toward Kenny Scharf’s vintage Airstream

Walking into the boutique-style Sagamore Hotel at 16th Street and Collins Avenue, I’m greeted by two grand dames standing tall: Lady Liberty and St. Catherine. The silvery twosome, made from an array of industrial materials, aluminum trash cans, Elmer’s glue and cigarette foil, is breathtaking. These astonishing works of artist Pablo Cano act as gatekeepers to the world I’m about to enter — a contemporary art house, hosting the vast private collection of hotelier Cricket Taplin, that’s been compacted into a white-walled hotel.

Originally built in 1948, the Sagamore is bright and angular. Even the elevators have an artful motif, with blue leather and wood interiors. Stepping off at my floor, I’m caught by surprise upon seeing a video art installation with a navy cartoon (one of perhaps a dozen video installations in the hotel). Moving toward my garden-view suite, I see poetic quotations inscribed on the hallway walls. Jasper Johns’ “Ideas either come or they don’t come,” is one I particularly like. Cool light fixtures reflect chandelier shadows. A chic white leather couch sets the style of my room, it matches the furnishings in the lower-level art lounge. Walking onto the balcony, I look toward a vertical mural with an upside-down face repeated four times; the man’s expressions run the upper length of one of the hotel’s facades.

On route to the pool bar, I stop in the stairwells before coming upon a stationary large white helicopter on a concrete ledge. The toylike “noo” disc with black and white painted motifs acts as a propeller blade. Thanks to descriptive placards with info on all the installations, I learn that Future of us is a sculpture by artist Robert Chambers. I’m transfixed.

At the L-shaped pool, a chorus of foreign languages can be heard; it becomes clear that fashion-savvy Europeans have taken over the Sagamore. My eye scans the view, which includes a towering geometric metal sculpture poised between chaises and scattered towels. I realize that I’ve already lost count of all the fabulous artworks I’ve admired. Lunching at the pool bar on a tuna steak tucked between slices of ciabatta with avocados, I converse with a family from Holland. This is the final leg of their three-week Florida vacation; they just arrived from yet another art-centric hotel, the Casa Monica in St. Augustine. They say they chose the Sagamore because “It’s art without being smoozy;” I think that description nails it.
MIAMI ART-SCENE MUSTS

ART BASEL
SEE More than 250 top global galleries exhibit 20th- and 21st-century art, work, plus special exhibitions, art fairs, and crossover events. The notorious party scene is a hot ticket on everyone's A-list.
WHERE Miami Beach Convention Center WHEN Dec. 1-4 artbaasel.com

ART MIAMI
SEE Some 100 international galleries showcase modern and contemporary art in a cavernous space dripping with creative energy. Don't miss the viewing gallery for video installations. European-style cafes provide a place to grab a bite and review catalogs.
WHERE Miami's Midtown neighborhood WHEN Nov. 30-Dec. 4 artmiami.com

WYNWOOD ARTS DISTRICT
SEE Exhibitions scattered throughout Wynwood include the Wynwood Walls, which features seven new walls showcasing works by graffiti artists in an urban park; the new Walls Outside the Wynwood Walls; additional wall art; and the Wynwood Doors — 16 new pieces painted on the doors of buildings. The Wynwood Walls shop at the Walls is its first pop-up gallery; the new Wynwood Walls book can be found there.
WHERE Wynwood Walls, Northwest Second Avenue from 25th to 26th streets, between 10th and 11th Streets WHEN Wednesdays to Saturdays, noon to 10 p.m. wynwoodmiami.com, the wynwoodwalls.com

As evening approaches, I'm off to the Wynwood Arts District for the Art Walk, held every second Saturday of the month. I take a picturesque route via the Venetian Causeway. The priceless views of Biscayne Bay and Miami Beach to my rearview mirror make me forget about the $1.50 bridge toll. Crossing Biscayne Boulevard, I arrive in Wynwood, a gentrified warehouse enclave just south of the Miami Design District.

My destination is Joey's Italian Cafe (joeyswynwood.com) on Northwest Second Avenue. Joined by a friend, we find the place buzzing with art-loving boomers, and it's only 6 p.m. (The Art Walk runs until 11 p.m.) Joey's interior is seductive. The black mosaic mural coupled with marble tabletops provides a stunning backdrop for our heaping bowls of black linguini with mussels and grouper. At the insistence of Catica, our 100 percent Italian waitress, we conclude the meal with a slice of tiramisu. It's exquisite.

The galleries of Wynwood are primed for the Art Walk, and the scene stretches along Northwest Second Avenue, with people strolling from gallery to gallery. Our first stop is O. Ascanio Gallery, where color-intense Latin American work hangs. In another gallery, unidentified due to its lack of signage, there are iconic crazy-hair troll dolls on exhibit. At Plant the Future, across from Joey's, cacti are embedded into unicorn sculptures. A 6-foot Charlie Chaplin impersonator rambles past, adding to the streetscape, and a stream of BMWs and SUVs keeps the young man at the valet stand busy.

Sidestepping new arrivals, we enter Wynwood Walls, a wrought-iron-gated commons, where a band plays cool tunes and cocktails are sold from a pop-up stand. The scene looks straight out of a movie set. The walls — exteriors of commercial warehouses, and the outdoor space belonging to Wynwood Kitchen & Bar — are saturated with edgy graffiti. It's here that onlookers take in Shepard Fairey's stenciled and spray-painted black and red mural, which is a statement on nonviolent protests. The message is depicted through larger-than-life drawings of Burroso women in head scarves, with the word "obey" featured prominently.

We meander toward Kenny Schach's vintage Airstream trailer nearby, a psychedelic homage to 1960s counterculture. The line to enter grows; my friend calls her 20-year-old son, a burgeoning artist. Her excited "I'm at Wynwood Walls" says it all.

Our final stop is the Peter Tunney Experience, where we find posters with words spelled out in collage formats, such as "GOTG AMF!" The odd word breaks in his message make you look twice. The critic in me concludes that all art should do just that.