

Over a glass of Dom Pérignon... AMBRA MEDDA

Design/Miami – it's more than a fair – it's a cosmopolitical think-tank for global nomades. The ones with a sense for contemporary design, that can create homes. The master of ceremonies and inventor of this transboundary spectacle is Ambra Medda. Author Andreas Tölke met her in Miami for a first glass of champagne, in Munich for a second one...



It was meant to be a short visit. When Ambra Medda went to Miami six years ago, she planned the trip to be a mix of business and leisure. The busy cosmopolitan was just passing through. Ambra Medda did have a flat in London, but in truth, her job as curator with a focus on design kept her on the move. Visiting the top stars of the scene meant living from a suitcase and travelling to their studios in New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Shanghai. Or, Miami. One night there was an unknown guest at dinner in South Beach. Craig Robins. Robins, one of the most influential men of the city, stole globetrotter Medda's heart. Their love was a lucky coincidence. The man that led her to turn a vacation destination into a per-

manent address is one of Miami's city planners who happens to have a great passion for design. He was concentrating at the time on the Design District, a project to turn a desolate inner-city district into a haven for all things beautiful. Jump a few years ahead to 40th Street celebrating its transformation with a huge party. Over 140 high-end interior design shops and galleries have made Design District their home. In the middle of the fray is the graceful Ambra Medda wearing huge sunglasses, looking like a young Audrey Hepburn. Their event, the Design Miami trade fair, is the crowning achievement of her partner's developmental assistance for the region. Apart from the Moore Building, the District's lively

centre, a zen garden was created that has become a global player meeting place for luminaries such as mega-successful architect Zaha Hadid, designer Ron Arad, whose steel recliners go for over 140,000 euros at art auctions now, and Enzo Enea, the gifted Swiss master gardener. The above-mentioned are just three of the big guns who dominated the well-received lecture and discussion programme conceived by Ambra Medda. The real stars, however, can be found inside. Eight decades of furnishings, or rather art works, represented by leading galleries from around the globe. Four days later, connoisseurs had spent 11 million euros on precious objects from around the world. The woman who

organized the fair is beaming. In its fifth year running, the fair has given the „Design Queen“ every reason to be happy. Not only was the groundbreaking fair a mega-success – the Italian designer presented her gallery owners at the same time as the Art Basel – the Design Miami is also expanding to the Emirates and to China.

This is the fourth Design Miami. What's new this year? Very, veeerrrry much. 22 galleries participated this year, five more than ever before, and we managed to go international: Design Miami took place in Basel for the first time. Otherwise, we cooperated with such important institutions as the Centre Pompidou.

And it took place at the same time as Art Basel, a clever concept. Thank you! We were very successful here in Florida since it was concurrent with the Basel in Miami. So it was a logical step to schedule the event in Switzerland at the same time as the Basel Art Fair. Our presence there is somewhat smaller – we don't have the satellite sites in Switzerland that we have in the Design District shops.

Was the enormous success a surprise? To be honest, no. It is incredible and I am being very careful about what I wish for. There is a saying in Italian, “You wanted a bike and now you have the pedals too.” So, I have to pedal.

In a very nice setting, that's for sure. Are you referring to our new offices? I have only one room here, Craig has taken over the rest. My team is small, two in Basel and four in Miami.

Are you a good boss? I hope by now that I am. During the first Design Miami I was incredibly excited and on-edge and that coloured things. And since I am such a bad manager, I keep my team small. I don't think I could handle a larger one. We are all extremely

dedicated, and that bonds us.

Where did you get your passion for design?

My mother passed it on to me. She had her first interior design shop in Milan, then later another one in London. Today she is still considered the woman who discovered Ross Lovegrove, who designed the Walkman. I grew up at trade fairs and auctions. We lived in Italy and Greece before moving to England. I have been all over the place and my mother's friends are artists and designers.

It wasn't your plan earlier in life to become active in the field, was it? That's only partly true. I got my degree in the History of Asian Art in London, but I also studied Italian design and Buddhist Architecture. You must be referring to the fact that I speak Mandarin, which must seem unusual.

That's not your only foreign language. Oh, God – now I'm going to sound like the biggest brag. I speak Italian, which is my mother tongue. I also speak Spanish, those two languages are related. I speak English of course, having lived for years in England. But I actually studied only French and Chinese, more specifically Mandarin.

Your language skills have inspired your next project. We have the first contacts in Shanghai. We will most likely expand the Design Miami.

The art market seems to be exploding. Is design becoming the new art? It's true, design is booming, but I hope it maintains its own character.

But didn't the theme of the last Design Miami lecture and discussion series Blurring Boundries stand in contradiction to that? Design is blurring the boundaries, and more and more designers are exhibited in museums.

The two are compatible in my mind. The value of good design is being recognised, and exhibitions show there is justification in exhibiting design. IN ADDITION TO art. And the boundaries being blurred; much is in flux. Artists are becoming politicians, and designers are creating architecture... Honestly, it's all very exciting to see the classification system give way to more than one position.

Are the Prouvé tables worth the price they're getting today, up to 150,000 euros?

Definitely. I have to say that. Compared to art, design objects are still relatively affordable. But the market is very volatile and is quickly growing. Even the vocabulary – the newest term is art design.

And a term that has been around longer: style icon. You are considered one of them. Oh God, that's awful! I don't feel that way at all. Design is definitely in fashion at the moment and has an air of hipness about it. But my focus isn't

on the fashion aspect. I am interested in what's here to stay, a quality that can be discerned even in contemporary design if you are looking for it.

What makes collecting design worthwhile? Design makes for great living. In the past, people bought pictures to match their sofas, whereas today it is practically the other way around. Having art around has become almost the norm. There is still a lot to be discovered in the field of design.

What's it like living in the eye of the hurricane? Do you replace your furniture every year?

No. Craig and I bought a table yesterday made by Maarten Baas, a young designer from Holland that we greatly admire. We also bought a small, 1930's settee by Jean Prouvé. But we are more likely to hang new art than change the furniture. Strange, isn't it? The biggest change is going to take place next week: we are moving into the house we built.

Near water of course... Right. We're moving to “Aqua”, a small peninsula. We finally have enough room for our guests. Zaha Hadid lives at our place when she's here, and Tom Dixon and Ron Arad visit us as well. In that respect I am very Italian.

And you drink champagne and talk all night. Hardly! I'm boring. I usually go to bed by 9:30. Champagne is exclusively for openings!

What do you do in your free time? How do you relax? I adore the sun. But last year I managed to get to the beach just five times.

Do you eat Italian food to combat homesickness? Off the mark again! I love soup. Soup, sun and a good book is my secret recipe to fight stress.

Let me try again: you treat yourself with all-day shopping trips in consumer paradise Miami.

To be honest: I find it difficult to shop here so I don't do it much. Not just here really, but here it is particularly difficult. Thomas Meyer, the chief designer at Bottega Veneta does have a great shop here. I like Italians. At least the fashion designers! I really appreciate the casual styles by Marni for example.

