

OCEAN DRIVE

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Artist Bhakti Baxter Breaks Brand

by brett sokol



Bhakti Baxter inside Wynwood's Gallery Diet with his new sculpture, Root Beer

If you want to tick Bhakti Baxter off, just tell him how much you love his artwork. Specifically, compliment the drawings and paintings he created during the middle of the last decade—from a darkly inked scene of young children blowing soap bubbles that warp and woof into a foreboding dreamscape, to a gorgeous portrait in oil of his late grandmother, so steeped in melancholy grace that its bluish hue practically envelops the viewer.

Yet nothing in that vein is on display at Baxter's exhibition at Wynwood's Gallery Diet. Instead, he's fashioned an array of abstract sculptures, paper collages, and most strikingly, 13 different Imploded Ball Barf assemblages—from soccer balls to basketballs, each split open to spew forth brightly colored "cosmic residue." If this stylistic shift confused anyone, Baxter says, so be it. "I still get e-mails from people interested in buying those older pieces," he explains with a grimace, sitting inside Gallery Diet. "That was five years ago—sorry!"

This is more than mere petulance on Baxter's part. Tossing aside one's established "brand" is potentially destructive to an artist's bankability. And it may explain Baxter's departure from the stable of prominent Miami gallerist Fredric Snitzer, a subject Baxter is loath to address beyond describing himself as a "free agent in Miami... They were a good seven years working with Fred. Things change and you move on." (Snitzer has previously declined to speak publicly on the split.) Baxter isn't exactly forsaking that earlier body of work—Gallery Diet has just published a lavish career monograph, XYZ 2001–2011. But extended talk about paintings conjures up a pained look once again.

"I'm not a firm believer in the point of view that says an artist should find a certain material or technique and invest themselves in it. Some people take a lot of comfort in that. I get bored. I would be really depressed if I was still making the same work as five years ago." He likens it to a popular band playing its big hit singles over and over. "Thank God the Beatles broke up! They said what they wanted and then went off to do their own things. The Rolling Stones are still playing the same [riffs]. They're still the 'kings of rock,' still making tons of money, still hooking up with hot girls. But in their peer group, who really has respect for them? They're so irrelevant, it's embarrassing."

It's telling that Baxter's concerns fly first to an artist's peers—not curators, critics, or collectors. But bucking an established path has worked out pretty well so far. Now 32, Baxter was part of the first generation of Miami-raised artists who chose to stay in South Florida rather than light out for commercially greener pastures. Indeed, prior to the late '90s milieu in which he graduated from the DASH magnet high school, most Miamians looking to make a living from their art had two options: land a teaching job or head north. The local art market was anemic at best.

"That decision was made for me," he explains of his enrolling in Miami's New World School of the Arts' BFA program. "I could move to New York, drown in school debt, and live in a [dingy] apartment with eight people I don't like. Or I could get a free ride here and start something fresh with my friends. In New York everyone's scrambling to push their way past bottlenecks. Here it's just 'do what you want.' It was an economic decision, but it was also about seeing the potential that Miami's affordability allowed."



Imploded Ball Barf, (cosmic yolk residue of transformation, mom's garage), 2011



Case in point: *The House*, a two-story 1930 Edgewater home that Baxter rented with fellow artists Martin Oppel and Tao Rey (as well as later roommate Daniel Arsham). "It was \$1,000 between three people. For a whole house with a big backyard! So we could afford to have a gallery downstairs." Subsequent shows at *The House*—and their accompanying over-the-top parties—not only established *The House* crew as some of Miami's most dynamic young talent, but they caught the eye of Museum of Contemporary Art director Bonnie Clearwater. By 2001, Baxter had yet to graduate college, but his work was already being exhibited at MOCA, while his face was smiling back from the front page of *The New York Times*' arts section. The arrival of Art Basel Miami Beach further accelerated his ascent.

If Baxter now seems a bit chastened by the expectations of that rapid rise, his artwork has come full circle. He's certainly become more technically accomplished, but his sculptures look back to themes from earlier in his career, before his mid-decade embrace of figuration. You can once again see his dueling fascinations with the precision underlying mathematical science as well as the weirdly unpredictable energy that seems to lurk just beneath the surface of so much of Miami's landscape. Even those *Imploded Ball Barf* pieces, for all their chaotic appearance, are constructed by a strict formula: only found objects from the streets and train tracks that abut Baxter's Little Haiti studio, and only as much colored concrete "barf" as would actually fit inside the pre-imploded ball. "Anything can be profound. Even trash found along the train tracks can embody huge questions in physics." The key is to avoid losing sight of the world beyond the galleries: "It's not 'I went to the show, so-and-so was there, I got the joke, did you get the joke? Haha, we're in this elite group called the art world.' It's more inspiring to me that objects can take on a new life. In art, one plus one can equal three any time—when two things come together, magic can happen." And if this intuitive approach doesn't yield the kind of immediate results of a drawing or painting? "You just need to keep digging, you need to have faith," Baxter says, before flashing a smile. "You drag some fresh trash into the studio!" To view artworks from Bhakti Baxter's *Rompelotas* exhibition, contact Gallery Diet, 174 NW 23rd St., Miami, 305-571-2288