

BY GERALD AND TRISHA POSNER

The Public-Art Controversy or, How a Romero Britto Sculpture Is Defining the Gateway to South Beach

Last month, we searched for a friend's last-minute birthday gift along Lincoln. He's a techie, so usually we're looking for clever gadgets. But he's also a great fan of color—his apartment is a veritable crayon box—so we thought we found the ideal present in colorful pop-art-styled mouse pads at the show room of Miami Beach's ubiquitous artist, Romero Britto. At \$22 each, they seemed a bargain, and we bought two, one of a smiling fish, and the other a sunglassed dog wearing a polka-dot shirt.

This was our first venture into the Britto show room, although we had passed many times. We had assumed Britto was an artist who did paintings, drawings, serigraphs and sculptures. At the store, however, we discovered he is a one-man art industry. His signature designs are on everything from jewelry, ties and stationery to frames, mugs, plates, scarves, perfume and even scented candles. In a few minutes, we learned that the 42-year-old Britto has designed for Absolut vodka, Volvo, Pepsi, Disney and Apple Computers, and his work is collected by Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Guggenheims, Rothschilds, Kennedys and William Woodside, former president of the Whitney Museum. Britto was even featured in an episode of Donald Trump's hit, *The Apprentice*.

But having lived in Miami for less than two years, somehow we had failed to learn that bringing up Britto immediately cast you on one side or the other of a long simmering debate over whether the wildly successful Brazilian-born creator is a real artist or merely a paint-

by-numbers, only-in-America success story. When our gift was unwrapped that night at a small party the debate broke out.

"I think it's very nice," said the birthday boy. "Fun."

"I wouldn't spend a penny there," a long-time Beach resident said.

And so it went—for nearly an hour—eventually evolving into a discussion of what is art, who has the right to judge it, and whether the strong feelings engendered by Britto are because he puts the commercial zeal of Andy Warhol to shame. And as we knew, this was no mere academic discussion best held for an art-history class: The question of Britto's art may be about to affect our lives on the Beach for years to come. Developer Jeff Berkowitz and his partners, Alan and Robert Potamkin, are about to start a long awaited development at Fifth Street and Alton, the gateway to South Beach. And Berkowitz, a close friend of Britto's as well as an avid collector of his art, has selected him to design the outdoor sculpture for the project. Future visitors will be greeted by two large palm trees with bright polka dots and a giant beach ball.

But the selection of Britto was not without a recent public fight during which Berkowitz had to stand his ground with the commissioners of Miami Beach and the Art in Public Places committee. A City law, the Art in Public Places Ordinance, triggers on a project if the City is financially involved. The committee collects a 1.5-percent fee of the developer's overall construction costs, money used to foster art and artists on the Beach. And



Romero Britto's 45-foot-tall sculpture, *Welcome*, greets visitors at developer Jeff Berkowitz's Dadeland Station mall. Many fear the same aesthetic effect on South Beach.

the committee makes a final recommendation, not binding, on the artist and the scale of the art itself used in the development.

The Arts in Public Places rule seemed to apply to Berkowitz's Fifth and Alton project because the City was paying him nearly \$10,000,000 of taxpayers' money to buy several hundred parking places in the thousand-car garage at the retail complex. The hope of City officials is that so much parking will alleviate the cramped garages several blocks closer to the beach.

But at a confrontational January 18th meeting of the Art in Public Places committee, Berkowitz refused to pay the 1.5-percent fee, about \$600,000, or replace Britto as his artist of choice. The committee voted to consider waiving the fee only if Berkowitz would select another artist. He did not budge. And at a subsequent Miami Beach commissioners meeting, only Saul Gross cast a dissenting vote.

"They don't like Britto," Berkowitz told us. "At the Art in Public Places committee we encountered the art snobs. 'Britto is too commercial. He is everywhere. We would prefer to see anyone but Britto.' That's all they told me."

"That is false," says Heather Urban, the chairperson of the Art in Public Places committee. "Whether it was Romero Britto or Andy Warhol, we would discuss all facets involved in a proposed art project—artist, location, scale, color, overall design, safety, etc. The developer never shared this information with us, even after numerous requests."

"As far as I was concerned," says Berkowitz, "if I am going to sell the City those extra parking spaces at my cost, and then they want to tax me \$600,000, they should either pay the fee or waive the requirement. It is my property and we are putting a Britto out there. If the City doesn't agree with it, or waive the fee, then the deal is dead."

Berkowitz and Britto are not newcomers to fights over his art at large developments. In 1996, the pair was embroiled in a tussle with the Miami-Dade Commission over a 45-foot-tall sculpture called *Welcome* Britto had proposed for Berkowitz's shopping center Dadeland

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Rendering of Berkowitz's Fifth and Alton development, with Britto's palm-tree sculpture in front.



Romero Britto in one of his creations. He says the debate over his work does not bother him.



Noted collectors Irma and Norman Braman believe "Romero's work at one of our entrances is a big thumbs-up."



Though he is complimentary about Britto, Craig Robins says developers should hire museum curators to advise them on art selection.



Gallerist Fredric Snitzer (left, with artist Robert Chambers) thinks a Britto sculpture on South Beach may offend Art Basel visitors.

Station, near the Dadeland North Metrorail stop. One commissioner thought the sculpture looked like Krusty the Clown, a character on *The Simpsons*. Another commissioner spotted on it what he thought was graffiti, a thorny issue in his South Dade district (it turned out to be Britto's signature, scrawled sideways among other doodles on the sculpture's right foot). "His work has the same relationship to pop art as a refrigerator magnet does," Paula Harper, art critic and professor at the University of Miami, then told *The Miami Herald*. "I would put a Britto sculpture on par with a sign for Caesars Palace in Las Vegas," concluded Amy Cappellazzo, international co-head of contemporary art for Christie's. "There's not a lot of conceptual or artistic rigor to what he does. It's more in the tradition of billboards."

At those stormy meetings, Berkowitz virtually echoed what he said nine years later in Miami Beach: Under the Art in Public Places law, art wasn't required in the project, and if he decided to spend his own money, he would choose any artist he desired.

"Britto at Dadeland is completely different," Fredric Snitzer, the owner of the prestigious Snitzer Gallery, told us. During the 1996 ruckus, Snitzer told a reporter that Britto was "some kind of a chewing-gum, MTV phenomenon. He's the next LeRoy Neiman—not the next Roy Lichtenstein. He's producing some kind of wall decor." Today, Snitzer thinks that "people who go to Dadeland may not even notice it. It is used as a mall. But Fifth and Alton is the entrance to South Beach. It houses Art Basel every year, and imagine the implications of the most important curators and collectors in the world being greeted by a Romero Britto."

For Snitzer, developers like Berkowitz "are arrogant, a dime a dozen," but he also blames Miami Beach politicians for not being more protective when confronted with art on private property that is very visible to the public. "It is the responsibility of people in Miami Beach to decide if they want their community to look like the Mall of America. Maybe one day Art Basel will move to Miami instead of the Beach. When you spend millions of dollars to bring an international art community to Miami Beach, and you put a Britto in their face, you might have to suffer the consequences."

Norman Braman, best known for the car dealerships bearing his name, is also a champion of contemporary art, and with his wife, Irma, has a world-renowned personal collection. He has also served as chairman of Art Basel Miami Beach, so he moves easily

among the art world's elite. But when it came time to choose someone to turn a Mini Cooper into a work of art, in the style of Alexander Calder and Keith Haring, Braman chose Britto.

"Jeff Berkowitz has made an appropriate choice in Romero Britto," Braman told us. "Romero symbolizes the vitality and diversity of Miami Beach. He has been and continues to be a very special asset to our community. Romero gives of his time, talent and resources to so many needy causes. Art is rarely agreed upon by all collectors—that's why it is so challenging. For the Bramans, having Romero's work at one of our entrances is

"I would put a Britto sculpture on par with a sign for Caesars Palace in Las Vegas."

a big thumbs-up."

Such an embrace of Britto sends shivers down the spine of *The Miami Herald's* celebrated art critic of 17 years, Helen Kohen. Now retired, she is establishing Miami's first art archive.

"It is in extremely bad taste," she told us. "Britto is the wrong image for people to see when they come to South Beach. He is a great marketer, a commercial artist at best. He is too bright for wallpaper, but not bright enough to be an artist. We have nourished art and artists for a very long time in Miami, and we should have by now developed an aesthetic and level of sophistication that would allow us to have something other than a Britto at the gateway to the city."

Kohen, not one to mince words, says, "I would like to slap Berkowitz and tell him, 'You aren't the only one here!' What I resent most is that the great artists have intellect and I see none here—this is dumb."

George Lindemann is a major Miami collector of contemporary art, known for his discriminating eye for new artists. He disagrees with Kohen. "Britto is absolutely the right person to do the art for the entrance to South Beach," he told us. "He is an icon of Miami Beach, an exceedingly generous and philanthropic man, and what better person should greet visitors? Old-fashioned art critics might sniff at him, but they are wrong. Britto and his art are the ideal ambassadors for South Beach."

The process of allowing Berkowitz to force Britto on the project bothers some other prominent Miami Beach voices, such as Beth Dunlop, the *Herald's* architecture critic. "The whole project is badly conceived and horribly designed. To me, Britto isn't the real problem,

and unacceptable."

Craig Robins, who helped develop South Beach and the Design District, has brought in leading architects and artists to create Aqua, his North Beach residential development. He is not critical of Berkowitz: "Each owner has the right to install the art they think appropriate on their property." And while Robins also has a superb collection of contemporary art, and is one of the leading forces in promoting art in South Florida, he only has kind comments about Britto, as well: "He has achieved great commercial success, and his work is normally attractive." But Robins thinks that ideally, developers would spend extra money to hire a professional advisory committee of curators from important museums (at least one from Miami), and those curators would advise the developer on selecting the best artist for that project. "I did that on Aqua," Robins told us. "I vetted my own knowledge with the opinions of others I respect."

Maybe in the end, it is not surprising that the gateway to South Beach will be defined by a giant mall that will boast Publix and some big box stores such as Target, Bed Bath & Beyond or Best Buy. And in front will be the Britto sculpture.

"Archaeologists often discover what a culture was like by the art and architecture they leave behind," says Kohen. "When they come one day and search Miami, our story will be told not by the artists and architects, but rather by the developers. They are the running guns of Miami. They are our industry. What they leave tells the story of who we were. Art and developers may have crossed in the 21st century in Miami, but it isn't art, no matter what you call it."

And what about Britto himself? He took our call on his cell phone at nearly midnight, while he was at the border of Switzerland, Germany and France. Earlier that day he had been at the unveiling of a new sculpture he had donated to a children's hospital in Basel. As unsuspecting as we had been told, Britto said the controversy does not bother him.

"I am really honored that so many people like my work, and that I was chosen to do the art for Fifth and Alton. It really is exciting. And I understand the process much better now. In the past, when they criticized me, I took it personally. Now I understand the dynamics involved. And the reason I am happy to be doing art that will be seen by so many people is that it will be celebratory and very different, and will inspire people who arrive in South Beach. I want it to bring some hope and joy. After you have seen it, then come and tell me if the critics were right." ■