



Sylvia Villafane Gallery in Wynwood

She did it her way.

Instead of waiting to see if her Puerto Rico-based Petrus Gallery would ever make it into the exclusive “Art Galleries” section of Art Basel Miami Beach 2006, Sylvia Villafañe did what any other sensible dealer would do.

Rent a 5,000 square foot warehouse in the Wynwood district; turn it into her own Miami gallery from the 7th to the 10th of this month; exhibit some 20 works of art (including painting, video, sculpture, and installation art); present some of her most cutting-edge artists; and throw her own parties.

Mad? Not to Villafañe, a 50-year-old native of San Juan who resembles a good-humored and charming version of Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*.

“Since I am a dealer who is pushing her artists internationally, I gave this place the name of Sylvia Villafañe Gallery, to distinguish it from the gallery I have in Puerto Rico, Petrus, because the name Petrus also is used in other countries,” says Villafañe during the opening-night cocktail for her exhibit “SJU-MIA One Way Ticket”. “I want collectors, curators, magazines and other publications, to know that in Puerto Rico there is also cutting-edge art.”

The impeccable and spectacular warehouse Villafañe rented from art lover Burton Reizes (who even lent a hand when the dealer’s artists needed help in setting up their work), has become the temporary home for the creations of Carlos Dávila Rinaldi, Franklin Graulau, Néstor Paoli, Eric Schroeder, Enrique “Kike” Renta, Aixà Requena (bottom right), Imel Sierra and Fernando Villanueva.

“This is my first time exhibiting outside Puerto Rico,” says an enthusiastic Imel Sierra, a former architect and Miami resident whose artistic career took off on the island in 2000 with a series of art projects in public spaces.

Sierra, honoring the exhibit’s theme of travel, created three pieces in the shape of envelopes that make up one installation titled “La carta que no escribo” (The letter I do not write), which mixes painting and sculpture.

“What is happening in Miami now, the transformation of Miami, has turned it into a vibrant and very rich place,” considers Sierra. “The things taking place here are mindblowing.”

Like the rest of his “SJU-MIA One Way Ticket” colleagues, Sierra is an investor in the project. He and the others contributed financially in order to come here and set up the exhibit. If they sell, the artists keep the money, Villafañe enhances her reputation, and everybody wins.

“Instead of bringing one or two artists and trying to locate a space for them in a Miami gallery, we decided to come to Wynwood because it is so much easier than entering Basel,” says Villafañe



unapologetically. “Just think... only two Miami galleries [Fredric Snitzer and Diane Lowenstein] made it. No wonder there’s this revolution of artists going on here, showing their work in Wynwood.”

Just ask Bernice Steinbaum.

For Franklin Graulau – responsible for one of the exhibit’s most striking art pieces, “Putipillows” (the name is a play of the words puti, slang for slutty in Puerto Rico, and pillows), where he turned the concept of pillows into fetishes – bringing his work here has been quite a challenge.

“I kept working on the piece once I got here,” says Graulau, whose medium has shifted from ceramics to canvas and polyester fiber. “And not only that, but everything in the warehouse had to flow, to function, and so I couldn’t be as selfish with my space or with the lighting as I normally would have been. We all had to think about each other’s work.”

This spirit of camaraderie in the art world, however, is not always there. Earlier this week in Puerto Rico, when Villafañe announced that she was coming to Miami for Art Basel, several artists there immediately pounced on her, publicly calling her a liar and vandalizing her gallery, for daring to say that she was in Art Basel.

“Oh please, I never said I was in Art Basel, but that I was coming here because of Art Basel. We’ve told everyone what we were doing, that we were renting this great space,” explains Villafañe. “I am so proud that we are here in Wynwood.”

And it’s only fitting. Decades before, a different generation of Puerto Ricans settled here, making this working-class neighborhood their own. Now, a new generation is poised to continue that tradition.