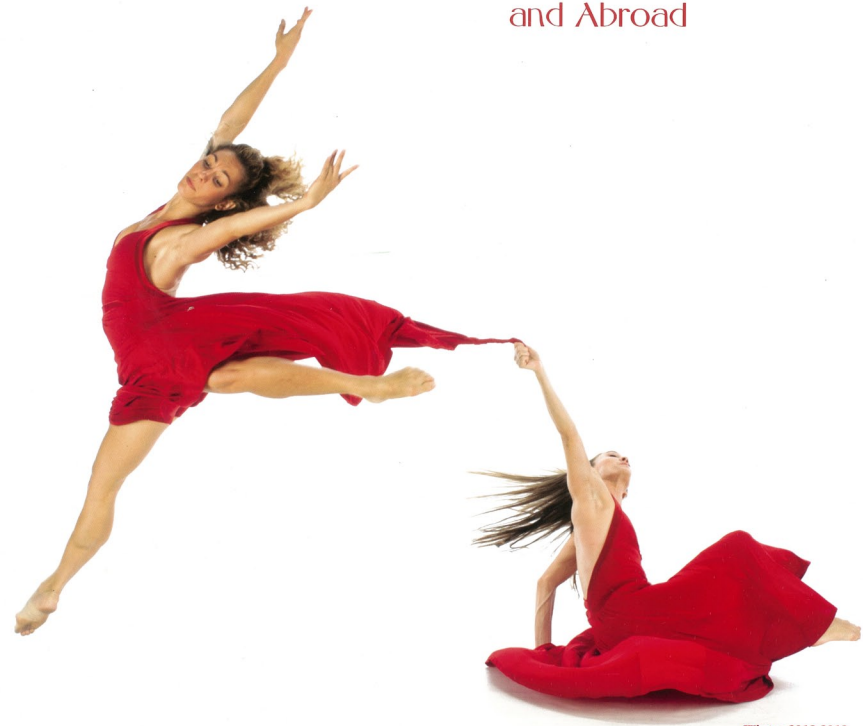


# The Country and Abroad



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Complimentary

## Basel/Miami: Art, Money, & Sex

Tom Wolfe's *Back to Blood*, reviewed by Deyan Brashich



Portrait of Tom Wolfe, 2006  
Oil on canvas, 26 x 24 in.

Portrait of Raymond Knister  
Collection of the artist. ©2006 Everett Raymond Knister  
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Basel, the sleepy picturesque Swiss fifteenth-century medieval town, is a center of modern art. Its prominence in the multi-million dollar art market is not because of the sophistication of the local cognoscent or the wealth of its burghers. The reason is greed, money, and taxes. Basel and neighboring Geneva are the world's "art free ports," warehousing a vast inventory of artifacts, free of import taxes and duties. Store, show and sell art in Basel, tax-free. Since 1970, it has hosted Art Basel, "The Olympics of the Art World." Basel has the money, but not the sex.

Anything but sleepy, Miami is a tasteless modern town, all concrete and glass, pink and aqua. It has vast stretches of ghetto neighborhoods and mean streets—Liberty City, Opa Locka, and Little Havana. Only in South Beach can you find glitz and glamour. The real money is in Fisher, Palm, and Hibiscus Islands in Biscayne Bay and Miami and Palm Beach. Every December, Basel exports modern art to Art Basel Miami Beach Expo. Miami provides the sex and world-class money. Show the art in Miami, sell in Basel, tax-free.

Tom Wolfe's novel, *Back to Blood*, just hit the bookstores after a \$7 million dollar advance and five years of toil. No, it's not about the art business, it's about Miami. But a chapter is a hilarious send up of Art Basel Miami Beach as seen through the eyes of Magdalena, an American Latina, not quite a *puta*, but definitely a hot *chica*. Magdalena, once a Cuban-American policeman's girlfriend, now a famous sex addiction-psychiatrist's mistress, finds herself in the maelstrom of modern art and multi-million dollar sales.

All the usual suspects, writ large as Wolfe does, are there: the paunchy billionaire Russian oligarch, Hebetnikov; in sweats and sneakers; the effete German industrialist, Heinrich von Hesse, who had already "spent so many millions buying art at Art Basel... six months ago," the hip blond Americana Art Adviser, Marilyn Carr [*notabene*: double "n"s and "r"s; that's class in Tom's world] fleecing both the seller and buyer with obscene commissions (\$3.4 million); the Art Dealer "the only man in a coat and tie ... black shoes so highly polished, the crease between the toes and the arch of the foot shimmered."

Wolfe sees the "billionaires and countless nine-digit millionaires... squirming like maggots" in the vastness of the Miami Convention Center. "The maggots!" he calls them bringing to mind Weimar's Otto Dix and George Grosz's grotesque morbid imagery stopping just short of being blatantly anti-Semitic, but with enough vitriol for all.

And, oh, the art, the "Art":  
"...a row of stout maple boxes, each three or so inches high and anywhere from nine to twenty-five inches long, unpainted, unstained, but lacquered with so many coats of clear lacquer they screamed at you. This man, Harry Goshen, opened the lid of a big one ... completely lined, lid and all, with chocolate-colored suede...and lifted out a big round slab of transparent frosted glass..."

"...the translucent glass flooded with light and there, somehow carved deep into the glass...in bas-relief, a young woman with long, curving locks...and a young man with short curving locks...were fucking...and you could "see everything," as the saying goes, and "everything" was flooded with translucent light."

Wolfe is a writer with a singular vision set in various locales. He beats the same drum, time and time again, but he is prescient. He has the knack of anticipating major tectonic shifts in American society, which he depicts with hyperbole bravado, caricature, countless exclamation points, and enough onomatopoeic words to sink the *Titanic*. In one paragraph alone there are fourteen "slams" of a boat against waves in Biscayne Bay.

Set in New York, his *Bohème of the Vanities* [1987] foresaw the rise of Wall Street hedgefund henchmen in a city full of racial tensions; wasps [white Anglo-Saxon Protestants] and Jews pitted against black color and anybody of color. In *A Man in Full* [1998], he anticipated the bursting of financial bubbles, this time in Atlanta, Georgia, again with the same racial tensions, with southern gentry sub-

stituting for the wasps. *Lan Charlotte Simmons* [2004] set in Chester, PA, a small university town, dissected the growing racial divide between rich and poor, white and black [the 99% vs. 1% forget the 47%]. Now, it's Miami's turn.

All his novels start with a pivotal front page news event with sex, money, and race as counterpoints. *Bohème* has a hit and run accident [attempted murder?] of a young black man by a rich white woman [man?] as its starting point. *A Man in Full* pivots around the rape of a young white hearse by a black super athlete. *Charlotte Simmons* leads off with a bloody beating when a politician, a Republican California governor, is caught in *flagrante delicto* with a student co-ed. *Back to Blood* has the hero, a Cuban-American cop, saving the life of a Cuban Marielito, a would-be refugee.

The heroic "at sea" rescue, it occurs within spitting distance from shore, saves the Marielito's life but condemns him to deportation back to Cuba. The cop, Nestor Camacho, as macho as they come, finds himself in the cross hairs of the Cuban American community: "By arresting the man on the mast before he could set foot on American soil, Nestor has deprived a proud anti-Castro [hero] of his right to immigrate."

Wolfe's Miami is a city of immigrants, more than fifty per cent of the population. But racial and class tensions in Miami are way beyond those in Wolfe's earlier books. He now has Cuban Americans, Haitians blacks hoping to pass for white, just plain blacks, Columbians, white red necks, Hotchkiss and Yale Americans, rich Jews, Russian oligarchs, shady Russians and Israelis to play one against the other. And they do, playing out an over-the-top American version of André Malraux's *La Condition Humaine*, another tale of a city's political convulsions.

To understand Wolfe's Miami "you got to realize one thing first of all. In Miami, everybody hates everybody." But that is Wolfe's flawed vision of Miami and the book's fatal flaw. Not everybody hates, and life is not just for "power, money, fame, and beautiful lovers" as Edward Topping, the book's fictional editor of *Miami Herald* thinks. It's more, much more and Tom Wolfe just doesn't get it, doesn't understand what life is all about.

Notwithstanding its flaws, do not underestimate the impact Tom Wolfe's rant will have. *A Man in Full* sold 1.4 million copies. *Bohème of the Vanities* became a major Hollywood movie [horrible] with an all-star cast—Tom Hanks, Bruce Willis, Melanie Griffith. *The New Yorker* just published a major scathing review, with *The New York Times* soon to follow. Even the tabloid *New York Daily News* has chimed in. There will be reviews and articles galore, perhaps even a movie.

After a \$7 million advance, do not expect the publisher Little Brown to go gently into that good night. The publicity machine and the media will be fully engaged to sell, sell, sell the book, and sell it must to justify the advance.

A documentary film by Oscar Corral, the award-winning journalist, *Tom Wolfe Gets Back to Blood*, has just premiered. Now I ask, how many novels get published complete along with a documentary about "the making of a novel" starring the author?

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