FIND THE CAVE, HOLD THE TORCH

Trevor Schoonmaker and Franklin Sirmans remember the nights they spent dreaming up exhibitions over drinks as young curators in New York—a practice they still cherish in their current positions at Duke University’s Nasher Museum and Miami’s Perez Art Museum.

By COLONY LITTLE

MUSIC AND SPORTS are two unifying cultural forces that play a significant role in how we identify ourselves, tap into emotional memories, and relate to others. Music lovers Trevor Schoonmaker and Franklin Sirmans boast parallel paths while forging a strong friendship based on their love of the two passions. As directors of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University and the Perez Art Museum Miami, respectively, the two are now positioned at the forefront of their respective institutions, with significant roles in shaping the future of curatorial practice.

Their professional worlds first collided in early 2000s New York, during a cultural event at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where Schoonmaker was working on a project with Frank Stella. It was here that they first met and befriended each other, forming a bond that has lasted to this day.

Schoonmaker: Definitely by the time I curated “The Magic City” in 2000 at the Studio Museum. We got to know one another a lot better during “Freestyle” with Frank Stella.

Sirmans: The beautiful thing is that we didn’t meet at an opening. It was probably at a bar or a club.

Schoonmaker: Chance are high. After every opening at the Studio Museum in Harlem, a group would gather at the Essex. Sirmans: There were so many institutions that were happening at the same time. “Freestyle” opened in 2001 at Studio Museum, then “One Planet Under a Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art” at the (then) Museum of the Arts in 2005. Our conversations were all about the field that’s a place of gathering, where artists were meeting and sharing ideas.

Schoonmaker: The trustees built this into a curriculum for the early years, and we tried to keep this as a center, but others don’t have. With someone like Frank Stella, the work he did in the 1960s was really important, but we’re also interested in documenting this era, because it’s so rich and so relevant.

Sirmans: The curatorial landscape began to open up in the 1980s, and I think a lot of that was because of the influence of curators like Frank Stella. The curators we admired in the 1990s didn’t work in New York institutions—or American institutions that mattered. They were all making their contribution to a very different view point. It’s about connecting spaces, and finding a way to connect people.

Schoonmaker: You have to come out as an identity as an independent curator, because you don’t have the identity of the institution. Your identity is that you excel at working with living artists, you excel at pushing the canon, and while I don’t have the identity of the institution, you excels at bringing together cultural efforts into your group shows, and supporting black artists and artists of the diaspora.

Sirmans: Music, without question, draws a much larger audience—the possibilities open up extensively. Franklin was curating “One Planet” when I was curating “Black Presidents,” and that s time people questioned the validity of the assumption. “Why would you bring music into a visual arts reality?” It has inspired the two of us so much in our personal lives, so it’s obviously in our work.

Schoonmaker: We’re frequently drawn to the same events where we support one another. We’ve had the luxury of visiting in Venice a couple of times. Once, we actually planned our family vacations to overlap.

Sirmans: The flow of ideas is always there. We’ll send each other an image of something that can relate to a potential exhibition in 2026. The Venice biennial is price-driven, and also brings in new ideas and new ways of thinking. I think that’s the wonderful thing about our work.