

Already rich, Miami art dealer Gary Nader wants what's next: a museum

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Gary Nader is, you can be sure of it, a hugely successful dealer of Latin American art. Smart, scrappy, savvy about the art and the deal, he has over 30 years cultivated a network of loyal, deep-pocketed clients in Miami and around the Americas who've made him a wealthy man at 54.

But Nader thinks of himself as more than just another rich — make that very rich — art dealer. Nader, the principal behind one of two groups vying to build a mega-development and cultural center on Miami-Dade College property in downtown Miami, firmly believes he's someone the art world must contend with.

He'll tell you so himself: Nader's self-named Wynwood gallery is the most important fine-arts gallery in Florida, one of the most important and successful in all of the United States, and the biggest in the world bar none, he says. His personal collection — “an insane collection” — is one

of the most comprehensive collections of Latin American art in the world. His stockpile of more than 100 works by Botero, a particular favorite whom he also happens to represent, is the most extensive and important in the world.

“I don't want to sound pretentious,” Nader says, modestly, as he sits in his office by a newly acquired canvas by Uruguayan great Joaquin Torres Garcia that he points to proudly. “I'm the most successful curator of Latin American art in the world. I know how to do blockbuster shows. I do extremely important catalogues and books for my shows. Very few people in the art world know what I know.

“I've done everything that is doable in my business.”

Everything, that is, except the *ne plus ultra* for the Miami art collector: Build his own museum.

What Nader has in mind is not just the usual repurposed warehouse. He's already got that: a vast space stuffed with works by the biggest names in modern Latin American art -- among them Lam, Matta, Rivera, Torres Garcia and, of course, Botero, whose big canvases and even bigger sculptures of ample-bodied figures have made the Colombian the most commonly familiar Latin American artist of all.

What Nader wants is a real museum, an architectural monument built around his personal collection, like the Guggenheim or the Whitney, smack in the middle of downtown Miami and big and snazzy enough to match the 18-month-old Perez Art Museum Miami just up Biscayne Boulevard.

Now Nader's unsolicited proposal to do just that at MDC has brought the art dealer much more than he ever bargained for. It's provoked not just questions about the need for the museum, but also unwelcome scrutiny of his apparent penchant for getting entangled in litigation, sometimes over seemingly petty matters; several claims of unpaid bills large and small; and even a couple of instances of physical altercations. Topping it all off: strong suggestions that Nader is *persona non grata* to many in Miami's art world, and that his standing in the broader world of collectors and museums amounts to far less than he claims.

Even if all his assertions are accurate, skeptics question whether Nader, who has no experience in development, is in over his head.

Nader's original museum plan has ballooned into a dizzyingly complex, \$900 million scheme that also encompasses a theater and conference center that the public community college requested. The cultural center would be topped off by two 50-story condo towers to pay for it all. The college would turn over the land and get ownership of the cultural facility in return.

The project has thrust Nader into an unusually public spat with a onetime client and close friend, developer and art collector Jorge Perez, whose donation of \$40 million in cash and art to what had been the Miami Art Museum controversially prompted its renaming when it moved into its new tax-subsidized bayfront home. Perez' Related Group submitted a competing proposal to MDC after the college invited other bids, prompting a scorching broadside from Nader. He called his former client the “worst thing” to happen to culture in Miami and proclaims Perez is jealously trying to block creation of a superior rival to PAMM.

Nader's blast came after an MDC evaluation committee gave Perez' plan a higher score and recommended the college's board of trustees negotiate with both Related and Nader's Museum group. The board will consider the recommendation on Tuesday.

Nader — who mocks PAMM as “a rinky-dink museum with four empty walls” because of its relatively small collection — questioned the higher score for the Related scheme, which has broad similarities to his. Those include a one-time cash gift and a plan to share condo-sales revenue with MDC to help it maintain and run the museum and cultural center, though both at a lower level than Nader proposes, as well as a smaller museum space.

But Nader is especially galled by one glaring difference: Perez is offering no art, just a furnished shell of exhibition space.

Nader is pledging to donate his personal collection of about 1,000 pieces, worth, he says, \$60 million, and to continue supplementing it with annual donations of art. In exchange, Nader wants the museum to bear his family name, and a seat on its board of trustees.

“Why build another empty museum?” Nader, who is nothing if not confident, says. “You need a collection to build a museum. I think I know a thing or two about running a museum. But this is not about me. This is my way of thanking Miami. We are the Latin American capital, but we don't have a venue to show our art. Let me do it.

“The day we open this, it's an instant success story. This is the beauty of this. It's impossible to fail.”

To be sure, Nader has assembled a formidable team of developers, backers and consultants that include a former high-level Related executive and Brazilian real estate investor Mario Garnero, co-developer of Mary Brickell Village. Also on the team: rising Mexican architect Fernando Romero, an alumnus of star architect Rem Koolhaas' firm who designed the vanity museum for the world's richest man, Mexican industrialist Carlos Slim — who also happens to be Romero's father-in-law. That fact has prompted speculation that Slim could be a silent backer for the MDC project, though Nader says he can't discuss it.

But Nader's proposal has raised questions about a potential conflict of interest: Museums usually bar active dealers from serving as trustees because institutional decisions can affect the prestige and value of the artists and art the traders work with. Some question whether Miami could support two museums with partially overlapping collections, or whether the donors necessary for the Nader museum's long-term survival might be turned off by Nader's name and involvement, noting that some significant supporters walked away from PAMM after it was renamed.

Others wonder about the quality of Nader's proffered collection. The dealer provided photos and basic info on each piece, but experts say that it's critical for the offerings to be vetted by an independent authority as to quality, value and authenticity. Because state law imposes a “cone of silence” on the MDC proposals, college officials can't say what they will do about that. But insiders note that some of Perez' offerings to PAMM were rejected by the museum when experts questioned the authenticity of several pieces.

The bids have also raised questions over the ability of MDC, which can barely keep up with maintenance of its sprawling network of campuses because of tight finances and state budget cuts, to take on an elaborate new facility, even with a share of condo sales. Terry Riley, the architect and former Miami Art Museum director who oversaw the design and the start of construction of its new home, says operating a museum of the size Nader proposes could cost around \$4 million a year.

“If I was MDC, I would think hard about the total costs to get a museum open before deciding on naming rights,” he said.

Nader's bid has also focused an unaccustomed personal spotlight on the dealer, who unlike Perez is little known beyond the confines of Miami's fledgling art world and collectors and dealers of Latin American art. It has revealed two sides to the man.

One side: that of a cultured art dealer with broad connections in his niche and a devoted following, including prominent business figures and celebrities like Gloria and Emilio Estefan and Spanish-language TV personality Mario “Don Francisco” Kreutzberger. Many of them also regard him as a friend.

“Gary Nader is absolutely first-rate,” said executive and collector John Dasburg, former CEO of Burger King and Northwest airlines, and a client of Nader's since he walked into his previous gallery in Coral Gables in 2001. “I'm a big fan of his. He's very sophisticated. I find him very worldly, very charming. I thought I knew a little bit about art. He knew a heck of a lot more than I did. He kind of took me under his wing. He knows where all the important pieces are, what the museums and what the private showings are.”

The other Nader: a combative figure with a short fuse and long string of lawsuits who's left bruised feelings among some artists, dealers and other people he's worked with — and, in one recent case, actual bruises.

Nader, who at age 25 had been charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest in an altercation with a cop, was charged with simple battery more recently — in 2012 — after getting into a scrap with two parking attendants in Key Biscayne. They told police Nader struck one in the chest and the other in the leg with his car door. Nader, who says he only “pushed” one of the attendants and claims they “assaulted” him first, paid a small fine after a judge withheld adjudication in a plea deal on the misdemeanor, court records show.

Just last fall, Nader narrowly avoided getting arrested after a judge presiding over a long-running lawsuit filed against him by noted artist Enrique Martinez Celaya took the unusual step of issuing a bench warrant for the dealer for persistently dragging his feet on court orders to provide information to the other side. The judge, who had already twice sanctioned the art dealer, quashed the warrant after Nader, who blames his lawyer, complied.

Nader is also currently being sued by a small courier service whose owner says the dealer blew off a \$9,000 bill for shipping more than 300 catalogues to clients all over the world, and by Miami law firm Carlton Fields, which claims Nader refused to pay a nearly \$54,000 bill for legal services — services Nader, who calls the bill “abusive,” insists he never asked its lawyers to perform.

Other long-settled cases may also offer insight into Nader's conduct. When the now-defunct O'Hara Gallery in New York sued Nader in 2002 for allegedly not paying in full for a painting, the judge fined Nader for failing to show up for mediation. The judge also ordered Nader to pay the gallery's legal fees when Nader paid in full to settle the case. Nader accuses the gallery owner of “blackmailing” him.

Back in 2003, then-struggling artist Adriana Carvalho sued Nader for \$2,500 after he sold one of her works. Carvalho says Nader flatly refused to pay her share, skipped three scheduled depositions and dragged the case out for two years before finally paying in full, though the litigation cost her more than that. Nader today calls the artist “crazy” and claims she owed him money, but says he paid to make her go away.

“He was very low-class” Carvalho, today an established artist, recalls. “He said to me, ‘You can sue me, I don't care, I pee on your \$2,500.’”

Nader also sued the family of Cuban master Wifredo Lam and Coral Gables Cuban art dealer Ramon Cernuda for defamation in 2008 amid a dispute over credit for producing a catalogue of the artist's work. The suit was dropped, but Nader now says he's looking to sue again if he can find the artist's son Eskil Lam — who lives in Paris and was in Miami recently.

Nader also seems to run into disputes with his lawyers. Two lawyers quit the Martinez Celaya case, court records show, citing “irreconcilable differences.” One of them was his longtime attorney, Michael Lascelle. Nader, in an interview, called Lascelle “a nut job” whom he had to fire and blamed his “mistakes” for the bench warrant.

His new lawyer, for the record, says Nader is behaving himself. Attorney Bonnie Riley calls her client pleasant and cooperative and says he has provided all the information sought by **Joe Serota**, Martinez Celaya's attorney.

Even Lascelle, while denying being “a nut,” says he has “no beef” with Nader, who he says was “extremely generous” during the decade or so he represented him.

“He can be dramatic, but I don't think that's injured him in this city,” Lascelle said. “Gary is not an anomaly in Miami. I know a lot of people who have had issues with Gary. He's had a lot of lawyers. Some people get shied away by his personality. But he's not a bad guy. Really.”

Nader says his wealth and position make him a target and dismisses the lawsuits as “small matters” typical for anyone long engaged in business, especially in dealing with the sometimes volatile personalities in the art world. He doesn't apologize for aggressively defending himself.

Nader, who in the course of the lawsuit sent disparaging emails to Martinez Celaya's New York gallery and a museum showing an exhibit of his work, calls the artist “completely crazy,” and accuses him of trying to “blackmail” the dealer.

“This little Celaya guy, trying to tarnish my name? I will defend myself. I have a valet parking insulting me? I will defend myself,” Nader said, adding after patiently answering a reporter's questions about his legal battles that it's unfair to ask him about an arrest from nearly 30 years ago. “I was a kid. I did get in a fight with a police officer who was extremely obnoxious. He arrested me. I was thrown on the floor by a policeman. So what?

“I have to explain myself to you? This is a joke. It's disgusting.”

The picture of Nader that emerges from interviews is a complicated one. Born in the Dominican Republic to a family of Lebanese extraction that runs a prominent art gallery in Santo Domingo — a branch of the family separately runs a noted gallery of Haitian art in Port-au-Prince — Nader says he learned to do art and the art business as a child, teaching himself to identify artists' styles and works. He studied business, not art, in college in the D.R., but says he educated himself by reading “thousands” of art books, eventually taking over the family gallery. By the time he moved to Miami 35 years ago, searching for services for his special-needs daughter, Nader says he was already wealthy.

At the time, he said, there were few if any galleries of Latin American art in Miami, and he realized that was a perfect, untapped niche for a city that was rapidly becoming the region's capital. He started small, in Coconut Grove, before opening a gallery in Coral Gables, where he operated for many years.

He is primarily a dealer in the secondary market — that is, he resells pieces already owned by a collector, or acts as an intermediary in deals between collectors, rather directly representing artists. But he has mounted shows of new work. Observers say he caught his big break when Nader became one of several official representatives of Botero. Auction houses say Nader routinely trades in the six and low seven figures. With commissions of up to 50 percent, that can mean big money.

In 2006, Nader bought the Wynwood warehouse for \$4.8 million. He enjoys the trappings of great success: He drives a Rolls and lives in a 8,800 square-foot mansion in the Gables' Snapper Creek Lakes section, for which he paid \$3.8 million in 2005.

His client list, a sample of which Nader readily provided a reporter, is A-list substantial: It includes such prominent South Florida figures as sugar baron Alfie Fanjul, entrepreneur and former ambassador to Belgium Paul Cejas, developer Ugo Colombo, Perry Ellis International chairman George Feldenkreis and lawyer and former Arshnt Center chairman Mike Eidson.

Some longtime clients praise the dealer for the breadth of his knowledge and his connections, which enable him to secure sought-after artworks from other collectors before they hit the open market. They also say he deserves credit for championing Latin American art early on, when the broader art market largely ignored it, and cite the fact that he's profited handsomely from the trade as a credit to his eye for quality and value.

“He is the one who pushed for the recognition of artists like Botero from Colombia or Guayasamin from Ecuador,” said former banker Abel Holtz, who said he's been buying from Nader for 30 years and counts on his advice at auctions in New York. “He's always been very fair and I think he's always been honest. Nobody knows the art of Latin America like he does.”

Nader's submission to MDC also contains letters of endorsement from the Latin American sections of the two leading auction houses, Sotheby's and Christie's. In his letter, Axel Stein, director of Latin American art at Sotheby's, calls Nader “one of Sotheby's Latin American department most important clients” and adds: “I can say without a doubt that he owns and runs the most important Latin American Art Gallery in the state of Florida.”

But Nader's bluster, his reputation for suing and getting sued, and his apparent willingness to publicly belittle people who cross him seem not to have endeared him with local art institutions, other gallery owners and big collectors not focused on Latin American art. Almost none of several prominent art-world figures in Miami and New York contacted by a reporter would agree to speak about Nader on the record, either failing to respond to messages, declining interviews, limiting questions to broad issues relating to his proposal, or speaking only on the condition their names not be used.

One even asked that the newspaper not disclose that he had declined to discuss Nader.

Some said that, despite Nader's conspicuous commercial success, he is little known outside his area of specialization, has no real influence in the broader art world, and that his boasts about the size and profile of his gallery are dubious at best. One person said many see Nader's museum plan as a play for the art-world respect and influence that has eluded him.

“Gary has his own mission. He wants to make a name for himself. He wants attention,” that person said. “But it's hard to take him seriously.”

The one art-world heavyweight willing to speak without conditions, developer and uber-collector Martin Margulies, was not complimentary. Margulies, who started the first private museum in a Wynwood warehouse, said he has not spoken to Nader for many years, since an “incident” in his private museum got into.

“I told my people, ‘Stay away from this guy,’” said Margulies, whose collection is widely regarded as one of the most significant in private hands in the country. “I've never done business with Gary. I never would. He's an overly aggressive person. In the overall art world, he's kind of a non-factor.”

Margulies, who has been scathingly critical of extensive public support for construction of PAMM's building given its small collection and equally critical of the decision to rename the museum for what he contends is a relatively paltry donation, also said he doubts Nader's proposal can succeed.

“He's not capable of pulling that off. If he gets it, it will be the saddest moment in Eduardo Padron's life,” Margulies said, referring to MDC's president. “It's ludicrous.”

But some observers say it would be a mistake to underestimate Nader or his smarts and drive.

“His ambitions are large. His reach is wide and totally toward the benefit of the larger art world,” said veteran Miami artist and curator Cesar Trasobares. “He's a reliable dealer by many accounts and he has the network of contacts to trade at that level. I have seen glorious Lams and amazing, amazing paintings by Pelaez at his gallery. You don't get those without the connections.”

Dasburg, the Nader client, says he feels certain Nader will do what he promises if given a chance.

“He has quite a sophisticated collection. He's interested in contributing some very serious, impressive art,” he said. “If he wanted to be in a business other than art, he would be successful, and I have no reason to doubt he would be other than successful at this, too.”

