

ARTINFO

Art Chicago Offers New Approach



Courtesy Art Chicago

At Art Chicago sister fair Next, Postmasters gallery was showing work by Hong Kong-born artist Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung.

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CHICAGO—One of the most striking images at **Art Chicago** 2009, held May 1-4 at the Merchandise Mart, was not in the art itself but rather the sight of fashionably clad gallerists patiently explaining artworks to Midwesterners in Dockers and sneakers.



Welcome to art in the age of economic crisis. No longer can fairs cater exclusively to those in the know — a broadening world and a shrinking global economy demand a new approach. And to their credit, Art Chicago organizers **Merchandise Mart Properties Inc.** (MMPI), did so actively and creatively this year.

The fair — accompanied at the Merchandise Mart by **Next**, a fair for emerging artists, and the **Merchandise Mart International Antiques Fair**, which boasted Martha Stewart as the keynote speaker — focused on broadening access to art through a number

of vehicles. These included a series of panel discussions called "Art Chicago Speaks"; Converge, a forum at

Next for which contemporary curators were flown in from across the country to discuss art's most pressing issues; and three stand-alone curated exhibitions. In addition, MMPI trained art professionals as docents to bring small groups through the fair, introducing them to gallery owners.

"We want to make art more accessible," said Kasey Madden, director of public relations for MMPI. "Every market depends on new collectors, so we took this opportunity to help people take their first steps into the art market."

This effort was accompanied by an overall downsizing, of both the fair itself — boasting 110 galleries this year, down from last year's 132 — and its larger context. In 2008, Art Chicago was part of a citywide cultural extravaganza that included five art fairs and a host of other cultural events at museums, galleries, and restaurants — all under the moniker of Artropolis. In response to dealer and attendee reports of sensory overload, this year featured just three fairs. The reduced scale offered a kinder and gentler art-fair experience: wider and more open hallways, greater wall space for exhibitors, and more lounge areas. The less congested space allowed for clearer art-viewing and more room for dealers and visitors to interact.

Lower price points at the majority of booths undoubtedly helped draw in potential buyers too. Nearly every gallery brought more accessible works, at dramatically reduced prices, than in previous years. In particular, works priced between \$5,000 and \$25,000 sold briskly.

Chicago Galleries Shine

Not that the high end completely fell off the radar. Carl Hammer Gallery, from Chicago, sold a **Martín Ramírez** for \$100,000, and Russell Bowman Art Advisory, also from Chicago, sold a 1971 Jim Nutt painting for six figures to a private collector. Jerald Melberg Gallery, of Charlotte, North Carolina, sold a six-figure piece as well, among other sales. Chicago's **Carrie Secrist Gallery** said it had several museums interested in *The Hadal Project*, an 11- by 24-foot photo print by Angelo Musco (which will be featured in this year's Venice Biennale), priced at \$115,000. A roughly 4- by 8-foot version of the same piece sold out multiple editions for \$16,000, one to Kansas City's **Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art**, and the even-smaller version, priced at \$4,000, sold out too.

"The best part," said Secrist, "was that no one asked for a discount."

In general, Chicago galleries seemed to fare particularly well. **G.R. N'Namdi Gallery** sold four pieces by the fair's second day to both new and existing clients, and **Kavi Gupta**, an organizer of and exhibitor at sister show *Next*, almost completely sold out his booth, which included works by German artist Ulf Puder, among them *Mobilien*, an oil on canvas for \$8,500. Stephen Daiter Gallery, with photos by Wayne Miller, **Art Shay**, **Helmut Newton**, and **Paul D'Amato**, saw steady traffic throughout the fair's run.

European galleries, of which there were fewer this year due to the fair's increasingly Midwestern focus and the ailing economy, saw more mixed results. Parisian gallery owner Bernard Bouche, a first-time exhibitor, found that the attendees were not his audience, whereas longtime exhibitor **Browse & Darby** of London sold well, albeit at lower price points than last year, and pulled in three new clients. (Andy Pankhurst's *Puglia*, an oil on birch panel, was the gallery's highest sale, at \$25,000.)

Another London participant, Woolff Gallery, had similarly positive results. "We covered our costs on the first day," dealer Malcolm Woolff told ARTINFO.

Next Remains on the Cutting Edge

Now in its second year, *Next* continues to be a lively and cutting-edge international showcase — made even livelier on opening night with free bourbon and a performance-art piece involving jelly wrestling — attracting such young talents as Canadian painter Marc Seguin, Hong Kong-born artist Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung, and

duo Zoë Walker and Neil Bromwich, whose inflatable pink tank installation was featured prominently at the fair.

Also featured was a show of the finalists for Philadelphia's \$125,000 **West Prize** and "New InSight," an exhibition of work by some of the country's top MFA students, sponsored by the fair and curated by Susanne Ghez, director of the **Renaissance Society** at the University of Chicago.

First-time Next exhibitor Bruno L. David, owner and director of the Bruno David Gallery in St. Louis, praised the opportunity Next provides for emerging Midwestern artists. "Having a venue like this allows many artists to stay in the Middle West," said David, who had sold homegrown artist **Cindy Tower's** *Brooklyn Amour* for \$15,000. "They don't have to go to New York and work three jobs just to survive. They can remain here and build up a body of work before moving on to other markets."

And, in fact, David touched on something that is becoming increasingly evident: Art Chicago may be shifting away from being just one of many international showcases to being a premier Midwest art fair — and thus filling a role that has never been filled before. In the ever-changing global art economy, fairs may increasingly take on niches to survive, and this might be the appropriate one for Art Chicago.