

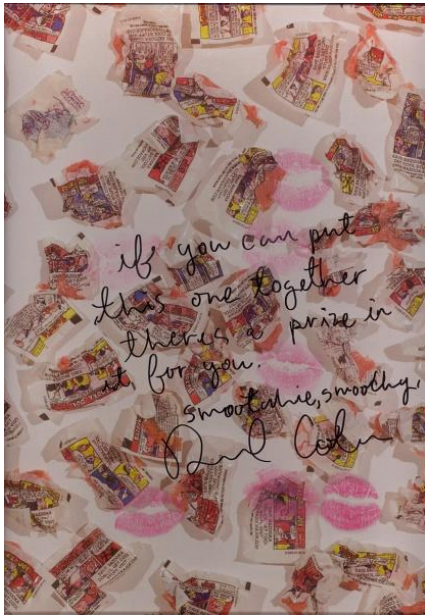
Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Art for All at Chicago's Fairs

by Danny Orendorff 05/08/09

Upon entering Chicago's Merchandise Mart for the Art Chicago and NEXT fairs of modern and contemporary art, it was difficult to gauge which caused more anxiety: the omnipresence of Purell brand hand sanitizer on site to ease any lingering swine flu fears, or the numerous permutations of economic-themed panel discussions that plagued the weekend agenda. The real challenge of this year's fairs would be courting the investments of young art collectors who may be uneasy about buying work (or, rather, still waiting for the artworks they already own to appreciate in value). With less cash in circulation, fair organizers placed an emphasis on cultural capital with CONVERGE, an ambitious program of panel discussions designed to help circulate new ideas on the collaborative relationship between artists and institutions.



The most interesting of these tertiary lectures were those that coincided with a separate weekend-long art conference, Our Literal Speed (OLS). Taking place over the weekend at venues throughout Chicago, the most talked-about aspect of OLS was undoubtedly artist Tania Bruguera's performance *The Weather Underground in Conversation*, a discussion with Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dorn (which may or may not have featured a few unruly, opinionated 'plants' in the audience, specially appointed to incite a response to the topic at hand: dissent in America today). Certainly, the fear of lost sales was implied in the kinds of artwork galleries chose to insure, ship and install at the Mart. There was a marked trend toward modesty, with less galleries featuring sculpture or installation work than in previous years.

There were, of course, some exceptions: On the Art Chicago floor, Galerie Anita Beckers of Frankfurt brought along Theresa Diehl's delicate, suspended chandelier installation of clear-glycerin hydrogen bombs and baby lamb figurines, *Last Lullaby* (2008), while white resin and fiberglass sculptures of young boys holding cellular phones by Jose Cobo (part of the installation *Cell Display*) were popular at the booth of Galeria Ferran Cano of Barcelona. A few floors below at NEXT, Johanson Projects of Oakland, California made a beautiful installation of Katy Stone's painted-acrylic, amoeba-like work.

Chicago-based galleries profited from their proximity to the venue, allowing Kasia Kay Gallery to showcase Qin Fengling's tactile, colorful works, which experiment in a kind of pop-pointillism by creating large forms from tiny, painstakingly detailed acrylic figurines. Kavi Gupta (who is a NEXT fair partner) featured German-based artist Ulf Puder's large paintings of abandoned architecture. Impressively complex drawings by Lia Anna Hennig and Robert Fry of London's Alexia Goethe Gallery, seemed to command buyers, while Mark Bennet's floor-plan drawings of iconic houses from American film history had many admirers at the booth of Conner Contemporary Arts, of Washington, DC. Chicago gallery Western Exhibitions took a conceptual approach to their booth, highlighting obsessive artworks from Geoffrey Todd Smith and Mark Wagner, whose dizzying collages of \$1 bills seemed like emblems for the entire affair. Another import from the irony department courtesy of London's Pippy Houldsworth, Yuken Teruya's *Corner Forest*, is a series of tree-shaped carvings made from toilet paper rolls - a clever commentary on today's movement towards creative re-use of consumer waste.

Established art world names popped up occasionally, with Galerie Piece Unique of Paris featuring many of Yayoi Kusama's polka dot-clad canvases and Chicago's Rhona Hoffman gallery selling large works by Kehinde Wiley in a neighboring booth. However, it was the non-profit RX Art, which places artworks within hospitals and medical clinics throughout New York that offered numerous works by exciting young contemporary artists like Nate Lowman, Amy Cutler, Rob Pruitt and Pierre Bismuth at affordable prices and with the added bonus of being the hip, conscious-consumer's project of choice. A limited-edition puzzle fashioned by Dan Colen was of particular interest. Offering marquee names in manners less threatening to the casual or beginning collector, ventures such as RX Art may represent a shift in thinking about how to best alternatively fund collecting endeavors when larger, more expensive works are less likely to change hands.



Jen Bekman, who keeps a gallery in New York, featured Sarah McKenzie's crisp paintings of partially-built structures at NEXT; she also appeared on a panel to discuss her 20 x 200 project, whereby limited editions of artists' works are sold for as low as \$20 via an online outlet. GOFFO organizers Noah Singer and Mike Andrews -- the event is an offshoot of NEXT dedicated to upstart projects and presses -- celebrated the 5th anniversary of their artist-designed, hand-screened T-shirt project, Imperfect Articles, by selling original works from each of the artists they've worked with, including collaborations with The Royal Art Lodge and Rashid Johnson. Perhaps the democratic battle cry of 'art for everyone' is beginning to ring true, after all.

[From top: Dan Colen, "Rock! Paper! Scissors! Sh..." "No! No! No!, Scissors! Rock! Paper! Shoot!", 2007 Limited edition puzzle by Dan Colen, courtesy of the artist and RxArt; Sarah McKenzie, Interior 2, 2008, oil and acrylic, 60" x 60", Courtesy Jen Bekman Gallery, New York]