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Aesthetica

ARTS & CULTURE
MAGAZINE



The booth of Cynthia Corbett Gallery at Art Chicago 2009



The wide aisles of Art Chicago 2009



Michael Rush, left, on a panel at Art Chicago 2009

AROUND ARTROPOLIS by Pedro Vélez

Once the king of American art fairs, **Art Chicago**, May 1-5, 2009, now in its 29th edition, is trying to reclaim its place (any kind of place), despite the current art-market recession and the difficulties of its own recent history. In pursuit of this goal, its current owner, the deep-pocketed and determined **Merchandise Mart**, has embraced a most American of strategies, betting that bigger is better.

Thus, we have the second edition of something called **Artropolis**, a cultural extravaganza that combines three art fairs -- Art Chicago, **NEXT** and the **International Antiques Art Fair** -- running concurrently under one roof, the iconic and appropriately named Merchandise Mart, the world's largest commercial building, located in the heart of Chicago.

To the surprise of many, the combo of Art Chicago and NEXT did not feel tired, even with the absence of many top hitters. Booths and hallways were spacious; it was easy to enjoy art without the madding crowd. During the preview, visitors seemed excited and even overwhelmed. "Art can't be just about money," one rightfully said. "Chicago is back."

Art talk, art shows

Chicago critic **Jason Foumberg**, who edits the arts section of the weekly *New City*, described the opening night as "a house party," adding "the festivities



Yale grad Lourdes Correa with her photos in "New Insight"



Works by Buckminster Fuller in the booth of Carl Solway Gallery at Art Chicago 2009



Nam June Paik's *Memory Trunk* (1997) at Carl Solway Gallery



certainly felt that way because you know everyone and spirits are high. While I'm sure, for some, anxieties also ran high, I think the city put on its best face."

Panel discussions, so often a bore at such events, were top notch and well attended. One for the ages had **Rose Museum of Art** director **Michael Rush** playing the passionate advocate for the ethical management of museum collections. Sharing the podium was a sarcastic **Heather Pesanti**, curator of the **Albright-Knox Museum** in Buffalo, which recently sold a trove of historical material to fund contemporary purchases. Needless to say, she thinks museum sales of artworks are not such a bad idea if viewed from a pragmatic perspective.

Other art stars spotted at the podium were New York curator **David Hunt**, Chicago critic **Polly Ulrich**, **UBS Collection** director **Jacqueline Lawrence**, creative consultant and curator **Isolde Brielmaier**, theorist **James Elkins**, and the seemingly ever-present **Shamim Momin**, adjunct curator of the **Whitney Museum**.

Less successful were the museum-type exhibitions organized by the fair on the fringes of its art-market bazaar. "The Hairy Who and the Imagist Legacy in Contemporary Art," selected by **Chicago MCA** curator **Lynne Warren** from the inventories of participating galleries, was crumpled among gallery walls and hallways that were rather close to the fair booths. The show looked a little too much like a selling exhibition disguised as an attempt to educate the public.

Similar problems were at hand in Next's "New Insight," a showcase for promising MFA students' from across the U.S., hand-picked by **Renaissance Society** director **Susanne Ghez**. Sadly, most of the work was derivative at best, and the whole enterprise of putting students to "compete" had the flavor of a sports draft. Amid the bacchanal, **Yale** graduate **Lourdes Correa** stood out with large-scale digital prints of dilapidated walls and corrosive pipelines tinted a striking blue.

Art Chicago 2009

Overall, the mood was relaxed and cautiously

Works by Bob and Roberta Smith and, in foreground, Tristin Lowe at the booth of Fleisher/Ollman Gallery from Philadelphia



Monica Merlin of Olyvia Oriental Gallery, with a painting by Ling Jian



Zhong Biao's *Temperality* (2006) at Olyvia Oriental Gallery



Art consultant Mariangela Capuzzo poses with a sculpture by Jeremy Thomas at the booth of Charlotte Jackson Fine Art

optimistic at both fairs, with many of the dealers admitting to lowered expectations, all the better to be surprised if anything sold. Not because they were in Chicago, but because the economy has everyone hurting.

One of the strongest presentations in Art Chicago came from Cincinnati's **Carl Solway Gallery**, which featured prototypes and other works by the visionary modern architect **Buckminster Fuller** (1895-1983). Filling one wall floor to ceiling were elegantly framed screenprints from "Inventions: Twelve around One," a Fuller portfolio produced in 1981. Subjects include Fuller's Tensegrity Structures, the Wichita House Dymaxion Dwelling Machine, the Dymaxion Car and of course the Geodesic Dome.

Beautifully designed, each work includes three elements: a drawing or schematic printed on clear film, a duo-tone photo on Lenox paper and a blue backing leaf of Curtis rag paper -- and the three sheets can be displayed in different combinations. Each print is signed and numbered in an edition of 60, and the portfolio goes for \$50,000.

Still available Monday -- and priced at a mere \$125,000 -- was **Nam Jum Paik's** amazing elephant-head trophy sculpture. *Memory Trunk* (1997), as it is called, is made from a large vintage phonograph horn (the head and trunk), a pair of vinyl records (the ears) and two Sony Watchman mini-TVs (the eyes).

Philadelphia's **Fleisher/Ollman Gallery**, well known for its taste for Outsider Art, made a strong impression with the English art scene's answer to goofy Americana, **Bob and Roberta Smith**. Otherwise known as **Patrick Brill** (b. 1963), the fictional art team of Bob and Roberta Smith have had a long career and were recently included in the **Tate's** "Altermodern." Their work at Art Chicago consisted of text painted in block and cursive lettering on discarded boards and billboards. Repetitions of the word "rubbish" are easily readable in an otherwise confusing tale of a heated confrontation on a tennis court.

But Fleisher / Ollman said that the gallery may not return to Art Chicago next year. At **Olyvia Oriental**, a gallery from London that specializes in contemporary



Paintings by Charles Maussion at the booth of Galerie Bernard Bouche



The scene at the NEXT art fair in Chicago



The "Goffo" district at NEXT



Miami art dealer Brook Dorsch with visitors admiring sculptures by Richard Haden

Chinese art, the feeling was similar. "Traffic has been OK, we've seen many art lovers but collectors are taking their time thinking," gallery curator **Monica Merlin** said, standing in front *Temperality* (2007), a painting by the Chinese artist **Zhong Biao** (b.1968).

In *Temperality*, Biao renders a realistic profile of actress **Kate Winslet** and two other women posing in a balcony, all staring at an imaginary cityscape filled with global architectural icons. The work, if I heard right, was priced at \$150,000. Let me just say for the record that this was one of the busiest booths in both fairs and one of the best-looking, too.

Business was decent at **Charlotte Jackson Fine Art** from Santa Fe, which had sold at least three works by **Jeremy Thomas** in the price range of \$10,000-\$20,000. Thomas' brightly colored floor sculptures look like oversized plastic popcorn or folded paper cups. Forged in mild steel and powder coated, they bring to mind the works of the modernist master **Tony Smith** and the contemporary artist **Anish Kapoor**. Present in the booth was Miami-based art consultant and art fair veteran **Mariangela Capuzzo**, who said she loved the sculpture and was investigating its possibilities for a "secret project" she is developing.

My favorite work at Art Chicago was an evocative painting titled *Mountain* by **Charles Maussion** (b. 1923). The painter works vast compositions in wide and thinned brushwork, juxtaposed to simple gestural lines that look effortless and feel quiet. How good is he? He is in the same league as Venezuelan painter **Armando Reverón** (1889-1954). Maussion's painting was reasonably priced at \$60,000. He is represented by **Galerie Bernard Bouche** in Paris.

The NEXT fair

NEXT, organized by critic/curator **Christian Viveros-Faune** and dealer Kavi Gupta, looked good, felt young and had the atmosphere of a festival. Galleries were from all over the place including Oakland, Antwerp, Dublin, Melbourne and Tenerife. One section known as "GOFFO" was devoted to publications, t-shirts, editions and nontraditional ephemera. The fair prides itself in finding new trends, so I guess this year's was generic homogeneity in rock-n-roll culture. On hand were insane amounts of work made out of record



Artist Angel Otero, left, with Chicago art dealer and NEXT art fair co-organizer Kavi Gupta

sleeves, Goth drawings, sad portraits and even bad art made by the celebrated **Ric Ocasek** of the late-'70s band **The Cars**.

Away from the teenage angst, causing a stir at the booth of Miami's **Dorsch Gallery** were metaphorical sculptures by **Richard Haden** (b. 1958), a Kentucky-born artist who shows frequently in New York. Haden beats and molds polychromed wood into sculptures of beat and molded realistic objects. The aggressive and expressionistic marking left from the construction of the works is visible and effective for psychological analysis. My favorite is *Baggage*, a beat-up and bloated suitcase, affordably priced at only \$16,000.



Angel Otero on the cover of the Chicago Tribune magazine devoted to "Art in Chicago"

If I had a dollar for every time I heard the name of **Angel Otero** during Artropolis, I would be a rich art critic. Born in Puerto Rico in 1981, Otero was lured to the **School of the Art Institute** with the help of hefty study grants. I still remember the day one of his teachers on the island, artist **Roberto Barreras**, brought him to the school's office in San Juan with huge abstract paintings on his back. Barreras was lobbying effusively for Otero to be taken away to greener pastures.

In retrospect, the determination paid off. Otero now finds himself with a promising career in the city. Humble and smart in person, he has won multiple grants (including a prestigious **Annenberg Fellowship**) and was championed by the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* as an artist to watch.



Angel Otero's *Untitled (Lovers Leftovers)* at Kavi Gupta Gallery

Things went well for Otero at the fair: his five paintings at **Kavi Gupta Gallery** in NEXT sold quickly at prices ranging from \$3,000 to \$8,000, and a waiting list is already forming. His paintings are composed of thick and generous paint surfaces -- carefully arranged to conform to images of broken flowers and ugly ducklings -- over flat luscious backgrounds dealing with intimate themes. Bravely close to decorative and visibly restrained from excess, his work is the kind of thoughtful painting that always finds an audience.

Nevertheless: Why is Otero important to the Art Fairs in Chicago? Because he represents collective optimism in the success of cultural products made in the city.



Cordy Ryman in the booth of DCKT Contemporary at NEXT in Chicago



Angela Bonadies' archive at the booth of Baltimore gallery Douz and Mille



Osama Mori's camphorwood sculptures at the booth of Tokyo gallery Megumi Ogita

Otero benefits from a system that supports him, ironic in a city that complains constantly about the lack of patronage from its cultural institutions. At least the fair organizers are doing their part. They deserve to be commended.

New York's **DCKT Contemporary** featured the post-minimalist works of **Cordy Ryman**, who stacks and steps multitudes of lightly painted wood chunks in corners in pyramid shapes. In other works, chunks of wood, painted following the direction and the irregular textures on their surfaces, hang on the wall like traditional paintings. These last are abstract and more decorative than the floor accumulations. Nine of Ryman's pieces sold exclusively to Chicago collectors in prices in the vicinity of \$3,500-\$9,000.

Other standouts at NEXT: **Angela Bonadies'** photographic archives of collections and accumulations by non-art-related individuals at **Douz and Mille** from Baltimore; **Osama Mori's** fantastical dragons and deities carved out of camphorwood at **Megumi Ogita** from Tokyo; staged color photographs by **Carlos and Jason Sanchez**; and paintings inspired by the way that camera flashes appear inside music venues by **Terence Hannum** at **Ligh and Sie** from Dallas.

Out at Monique Meloche

The progressive Chicago dealer **Monique Meloche** did not participate in Artropolis, but her presence was felt nevertheless in the ancillary party and auction of a "one-of-a-kind" gown made by SAIC alumni **Moire Kyla Conroy** that she organized at the **James Hotel**. The special dress was chosen by the **Oscar's Designer Challenge** and worn to the **Academy Awards**.

At Meloche's gallery, Texas-born **Joel Ross** had a solid exhibition titled "Roadside: A Presentation of Recent Field Experiments and Prototypes." It consists of photographic documentation (mounted in light boxes) of signage and billboards made by the artist and then placed, without proper permits, at diverse locations in rural Illinois. The most effective are the nightscapes. They convey an eerie aura and defeated sense one gets when being lost at night

The Campos Collection



Chicago art dealer Monique Meloche (left) and collector Ellen Sandor
Photo by Robert Carl

On Sunday, Peru-born collector **Sebastián Campos** opened the doors of his glass-walled apartment in downtown Chicago to anyone interested in seeing his collection. Overlooking the imposing **John Hancock Tower**, the apartment is stacked with art from top to bottom.

Sebastián's interest in accumulating art objects runs in the family -- **Luis F. Campos**, his dad, has been collecting Kinetic and Concrete and Neo-Concrete Latin-American art for 35 years and owns over 500 works, all of which Sebastián manages in Houston. Sebastián has also played other roles in the art business: he studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, worked as an artist and at commercial galleries, and even interned with **Mari Carmen Ramírez** for the exhibition "Inverted Utopias" at the **Museum of Fine Arts, Houston**.



Joel Ross' *False Promises* at Monique Meloche

What is interesting about Sebastián is that he talks like a curator, justifying every new acquisition as the prolonged continuation, reaction and conversation with works already in his collection. He also admits to sometimes buying art he thinks might help him understand his inner feelings or feel better after a rough patch. He told visitors that he also follows in the tradition of "buying for his unborn child" -- Campos is not married, and proof of this idea can be seen in a hallway, where **John Sparragano's** defaced and re-collaged comic book page hangs besides one of **Michael Scoggins'** huge doodled child-like drawings on oversized spiral notebook.



Sebastián Campos with a magnet abstraction by Beto de Volder

Sebastián stated that, like many, he had acquired works by **Andy Warhol** and other usual suspects because "I needed to make those big acquisitions to prove myself and to move on to works that represent me and my interest."

Today his collection includes a non-traditional mix of young artists from Latin American, Canada and the U.S., Chicago in particular, with works that span Neo-figuration, abstraction, photography and painting. One gem is **Jac Leirner's** grid of worthless Brazilian "cruzeros" covered with written graffiti, an assemblage that resembles a dirty napkin. We also saw great works by Canadian **Kent Dorn**, who works collages with paint skins and photographs; a huge **Davis**



A work by Jac Leirner in the Campos Collection



A work by Kent Dorn in the Campos Collection



Juan Gris in the closet at the Campos Collection

Langlois drawing of **Timothy Leary**; intricate Neo-Concrete-based drawings by Argentinean **Gustavo Díaz**; a soccer ball outfitted with nipples by **Nicola Constantina**; and a magnet painting visitors could play with by the Argentine artist **Beto de Volder**.

Hidden in a closet is a **Juan Gris**. It hangs beside a rack of tennis shoes.

For Sebastián, who is trying to get his hands on a work by Angel Otero, supporting young artists in the city is his most important asset. He also expresses that more collectors should do the same more often, as a way to keep the local product from moving out. In the end, that was the whole idea of Artropolis.

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