

ARTINFO

High Hopes and Modest Prices Mark D.C.'s Inaugural (e)merge Art Fair

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Courtesy of Washington Project for the Arts
Kyan Bishop and Kate Hardy's installation, "Near Distant Past," 2008

WASHINGTON, D.C.— Over 5,000 art lovers in Washington, D.C. — from art students to curators to mere spectators — flocked to the **Morris Lapidus**-designed **Capitol Skyline Hotel** over the weekend for the **(e)merge art fair**, put on by former **Pulse** executive director **Helen Allen** and two D.C. gallery partners, **Leigh Conner** and **Jamie Smith** (who together run **Conner Contemporary Art**). The fair attempted valiantly to capture the eye of newer collectors, with most of the art for sale at a prices below \$10,000, and most of the galleries' prices falling between \$500 and \$5,000, according to my informal survey.

The fair organizers were concerned with "how to make artists more present at art fairs," according to Smith, and as its name suggests, (e)merge set out to be a platform to showcase emerging artists as well as galleries. Galleries paid for their booths, which were set up in hotel rooms along the second- and third-floor hallways. However, a coterie of unrepresented artists, after making it past a selection committee, could showcase their work for free on the first floor and in the basement parking garage (where many of the large-scale works were).

The emerging artist section gave (e)merge a particularly lively feel, since so many of the artists were themselves wandering around the event. On Friday, **Avery Lawrence** was spotted strolling through the hotel lobby in his "tennis whites" (short white shorts, tube socks, and white helmet), on a break from the performance aspect of "Moving a Tree" — a video/performance piece that involved Lawrence walking on a treadmill with a tree stump strapped to his back — in the **Heiner Contemporary** gallery's room.

Lawrence and Heiner Contemporary were one of the few spaces that really re-imagined the hotel room space they had to work in, going so far as to create screen-printed "wallpaper" for the walls. The package was a success: **Margaret Heiner**, the gallery's founder, reported that she met several new clients and sold several pieces of Avery's work. (Many of the drawings in the room were priced around \$2,500.)

Conner Contemporary, the gallery of two of the fair's directors, occupied two rooms in a second-floor corner of the hotel. In one of the rooms, ARTINFO found the artist **Katie Miller**, whose works commanded some of the highest prices at (e)merge. She explained that much of her work confronted the exploitation of children in society. "Kitty Lil's Fresh Catch," a realist work based on the faces of "Lil Bratz" dolls, had an asking price of \$8,500.

Down on the floors devoted to solo presentations, meanwhile, most of the artists (though not all) were hanging around to chat about their work. **Craig Kraft**, an artist from the D.C. area who works with neon, sat in a small alcove between the stairs and the entrance to the basement exhibition space. He admitted that it was a stretch to view himself as an "emerging" artist — he's created several public artworks for institutions around D.C. But he lost his gallery representation last year when it went out of business, so technically, being unrepresented, he qualified as "emerging" or, rather "(e)merging."

In his alcove, Kraft was selling his neon works from a 2011 series called "Drawn in the Dark" for \$5,000. Another neon work, "Unintentional Drawing #3" (2009), was priced at \$8,000. Source drawings from his neon works were \$450-650. One of these sold over the weekend, he reported after the close of the fair.

While many of the artists and galleries in attendance were from the D.C. area, there were a few who came from further afield. **Monique Meloche**, of self-titled **moniquemeloche** gallery in Chicago, brought wares ranging in price from \$1,000-4,500. On Friday, Meloche told ARTINFO that she had observed a "steady and interested" group of people pass through the gallery's room over the course of the first day. At the end of the weekend, Meloche remarked that she had made contact with new clients.

Would she return to DC? Definitely, Meloche said, citing the fair's "great vibe" and the exceptional organization.

Participants from New York included **Lu Magnus**, a gallery that opened just ten months ago on the Lower East Side, and the 42-year-old nonprofit gallery space **White Columns**. Lu Magnus founder **Amelia Abdullahsani** said that it was hard to tell how many serious buyers there were, as many collectors held off on purchases but said they would follow up later. But, she noted, the exposure that her artists got was worth the trip. "Our biggest success was with meeting museum curators and public foundations from the DC/Baltimore area," she said.

Before launching, the fair drew comparisons to the **Art DC** fair, which began in 2007 but shuttered after just a year as the cracks in the nation's economic stability were beginning to show. Around the hotel last weekend, however, both the directors and many of the participating galleries insisted that this fair was different — and the differences had to do with more than just the economic climate. Jamie Smith, one of the (e)merge co-founders, emphasized that it was the "outsider" nature of Art DC that led to the fair's downfall, not the location. "It's not really something you can force on a community."

So, will (e)merge return? The nation's capital, according to the fair organizers, has youth, vitality, a "tremendous interest in culture," and, perhaps most importantly of all, wealth (the suburbs of Washington include many of the wealthiest communities in the nation). All that is left is convincing the D.C. upper crust that they should be spending their money on art.

That, it seems, might prove to be harder to do than to say. As **Mayer Fine Art's Lenny Campello** said during a Friday lull, "A curator here would rather take a cab to Dulles to see and emerging artist in Berlin than take a cab to Georgetown to see an emerging artist at a local gallery." Still, (e)merge was a step in the right direction.