

# THE ART NEWSPAPER

## Emerging into dim light

*Washington, DC's newest fair offered bargain prices and grassroots ambition, but struggled with sub-gallery conditions*

By Bonnie Rosenberg. Web only, Published online: 03 October 2011



The Emerge art fair was housed in the Rubell-owned Capitol Skyline Hotel

WASHINGTON, DC. The Emerge art fair, a new fair designed to show emerging artists and to attract less experienced collectors, held its first edition last week (22-25 September) in the US capital. The fair received a lot of attention before its opening, principally because of the involvement of Mera Rubell, the high-profile, Miami-based art collector. Not only did Rubell host the event in the Capitol Skyline Hotel, which she and her husband own, she also sat on the selection committee for the fair.

The Rubells, well-known patrons of young artists, have made a considerable artistic investment in the city. They are currently preparing to open a new contemporary art museum across the street from the fair in the south-west part of the city. The institution, which is scheduled to open in 2014, will be the couple's second private museum: the first opened in Miami in 1993, and regularly hosts public exhibitions of works by artists including Mark Bradford, Urs Fischer and Christopher Orr. "There's such a pent-up interest in contemporary art [in Washington, DC]," said Rubell, speaking hours before the

opening for press and friends on Thursday.

Although the fair aimed for an international line-up, most of the 37 participating galleries and non-profits were from Washington and the surrounding area. One novel feature was that nearly half of the available exhibition space was given over, free of charge, to 39 unrepresented artists. Exhibitors were chosen from a pool of 300 applications and their work appeared throughout the hotel, from the guest rooms to the garage.

Commercial galleries paid \$4,700 per room for the duration of the fair, while non-profits were charged \$2,350. This is a significant increase on the normal cost of \$158 per night (pre-tax) for a bedroom, but according to Tanya Selvaratnam, the communications officer for the Rubell Family Collection, the hotel did not profit from the event and the Rubells had no financial stake in the fair. Fees included exhibition space, security and advertising. The mark-up was countered by the 30% to 50% discount given to gallerists and artists to stay in during the fair.

While Washington, DC is famed for its museums, including the National Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the local gallery scene is far from robust. The city's most recent attempt at a fair was 2007's ArtDC, which launched during the art market boom, but still only lasted a year.

"That was a big box fair that wasn't connected deeply to the city. It was an outside enterprise," said Jamie Smith, who is a co-founder of Emerge along with Leigh Conner and Helen Allen, the former director of Pulse. "The buying power is certainly here, and the cultural interest is here," said Smith. She and Conner also run the local Conner Contemporary Art gallery. Both hope that their grassroots fair will propel the city's commercial scene to a new level, the main difference between this and ArtDC being that Emerge is a home-grown initiative, said Smith.

However, despite its ambitions, Emerge was hampered by a bleak location and the curatorial challenges that stem from rooms that were, by gallery standards, cramped and dimly lit rooms. Around 1,400 people attended the preview on 22 September, although few out-of-towners were in evidence. One New Yorker, Christopher Apgar, a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, had travelled to the fair with his wife, but not to buy. He said he wanted to show support for Allen and added that he did not see many other Manhattanites.

Those who did attend were in no hurry to buy, given the low prices and lack of competition. "It's not like Art Basel Miami Beach, where you see a Basquiat for \$11m and have to buy it now or it won't be there later," said local collector and curator Michael Pollack.

To attract new collectors, the fair's organisers suggested galleries keep their prices at \$5,000 and under, although not all heeded the price cap. Milan-based gallery Jerome Zodo Contemporary offered a large-scale ceramic engine by mid-career New York artist Steven Montgomery, priced at \$42,000. *Static Fuel #4, 2005*, was one of the most expensive works on show, but never found a buyer. Jerome Zodo, the gallery's director, said he had expected more of the fair and its promotion. Nonetheless, he made one sale of a work priced at only \$2,500—Brooklyn artist Ben Grasso's small oil painting *Adaptation, 2011*.

Washington's art scene suffers from an "inferiority complex" compared with places such as New York, said Rubell, adding: "There are pioneers here, but you need a critical mass." For this fair, that mass has yet to be fully realised, though its organisers plan to hold an improved second edition next year.