

(e)merge Art Fair Renewed for 2012

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LouLou and the Disappointer Sisters perform on Thursday

Not every artist that applied to exhibit at the (e)merge art fair made the cut, but they did get a consolation prize: Organizers gave each of them a free day pass to the inaugural event. A number of artists told me about the passes, and how much they appreciated the simple gesture.

Art dealers wanted to hear something else: that (e)merge isn't a one-off event. Good news: Fair co-director **Leigh Conner** confirms that (e)merge will return next year and that planning for the 2012 edition will begin soon. Which of course makes (e)merge a more successful fair than 2007's artDC fair—even if dealers didn't make a great deal of sales.

Back in 2007, when I asked artDC director **Ilana Vardy** how much the fair expected to clear, her answer did not inspire any confidence: "Your question should be how much ArtDC expects to lose. The answer is hundreds of thousands." The idea was to spend money to make buzz, but artDC failed to generate any.

So artDC didn't return. And while it's possible that the D.C. galleries that participated in (e)merge didn't sell any more work this weekend than they did at artDC, dealers described the experiences as night and day.

First and foremost, the (e)merge fair seemed to bring many, many more people through its doors than artDC. According to an associate at Conner, the opening celebration brought out an estimated 1,400 people; that's hundreds more than I recall at artDC's opening. Some number of them has to be attributed to the art-world influence of the fair's organizers—Conner, **Jamie Smith**, and **Helen Allen**—as well as the venue's owner, art collector **Mera Rubell**. (In terms of generating buzz, they did it. I was officially impressed when the *Financial Times* previewed the fair; I was somewhat less enthusiastic that ARTINFO ran an op-ed by the fair directors about why the city needs them.) The hotel's rooms, hallways, and garage were all crowded on Saturday afternoon, when I visited. Dealers, nonprofit directors, and alternative-art-space organizers seemed to be having a good time, saying that, while they hadn't seen many by Saturday afternoon, the crowds were varied (a mix of artists, curators, and collectors). **Chelsea Clinton**—a celebrity!—was spotted at the fair on Sunday.

For all the influence of Rubell, Allen, et al., the city has grown so dramatically in recent years that it's hard to look out into a crowded art space and pick the local art-scene nerds from the tourists. This weekend, D.C. played host to (e)merge, with its multiple levels of art and performance; some satellite events (Submerge, But Is It Art?, FairFairFair); and the independently organized Art All Night events, a whole other thing that included a large party and show at the old Wonderbread factory in Shaw. I saw as much D.C. performance art on Saturday as I saw between 2003 and 2010 in D.C., and I didn't even see everything that was on offer. The Rubells' interest in D.C. is a symptom of something happening here, not the cause of it.

Photo by Matt Dunn