

(e)merge Art Fair 2012: Fewer Europeans, More Performance Art

By **Kriston Capps** on Sep. 6, 2012



Opening party at (e)merge 2011

Everyone knows that it takes three years to launch an art fair. It's one of those universally acknowledged rules of thumb in the art world. In fact, back in 2007, when **Ilana Vardy** launched artDC—the first big art fair in Washington for at least two decades—she lined up a three-year commitment with the Washington Convention Center, she said, to give the fair the proper runway. The fair didn't return for a second year, but that's beside the point.

(e)merge, the art fair launched by Connersmith founders **Leigh Conner** and **Jamie Smith** with art-fair veteran **Helen Allen**, is more than halfway to the goal line. The fair recently announced the gallery and artist lineup for its second inauguration, which takes place Oct. 4–7. Today, the organizers announced a poolside preview party for Thursday, Oct. 4, featuring **Thievery Corporation** with **Eric Hilton**.

There are two conclusions to draw from the lineup: Europe is doomed, and D.C. is the nation's capital for performance art.

The number of foreign galleries participating in (e)merge hasn't changed by much, but the range has shifted somewhat with the market. Last year, (e)merge organizers announced nine galleries from eight nations outside the U.S. as exhibitors—many from Europe. Among other changes, this year's lineup has seen galleries from France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom drop out (although there are other exhibitors from the continent). Meanwhile, galleries from Cuba and Puerto Rico—countries that are talked up these days as hot new art markets—have signed on, for a total of eight international galleries from seven nations outside the U.S. (The number is subject to change as more galleries hop on.)

Then there's the rest of it. With 50-some unrepresented artists performing or participating over the course of the weekend, (e)merge is the biggest event on the calendar for young, untested, or noncommercially viable artists, in Washington or maybe anywhere on the East Coast. This year's festival features the usual suspects (**Holly Bass**, **J.J. McCracken**) as well as some less familiar names (**Katie Kehoe**, **Mandy Cano Villalobos**).

Not all of these artists are performance artists, but the fact that the unaligned-artist lineup is so performance-heavy is telling. It says that the fair supports artists, not just dealers, and it says that (e)merge is distinguishing itself on the calendar of art fairs, which are often nothing more than trade conventions (albeit extremely sexy ones). Witness **Wilmer Wilson IV**, who had a breakout first performance at (e)merge last year. Now he's represented by Connersmith. Plus, given the number of *satellite fairs* that mushroomed up in response to (e)merge for its first go-round, there's reason enough to suspect the first weekend in October will see art nerds hiking all over the city for performances, installations, parties, and other things.

One drawback: Southwest itself. The (e)merge fair takes place at the Capitol Skyline Hotel, the **Morris Lapidus**-designed, *Brightest Young Things*-approved inn owned by Miami art collectors **Don** and **Mera Rubell**. Last year, the neighborhood's shortcomings were on full display anytime anyone at (e)merge got hungry enough to cross South Capitol Street's frantic traffic to get to the sole restaurant in the immediate vicinity: McDonald's.

Then again, *there's a plan for Southwest*, isn't there? Unfortunately, it's going to take Southwest a bit more than three years to get off the ground.

Photo by Matt Dunn