

# The Washington Post

## (e)merge fair celebrates a groundswell of support for contemporary art in D.C.

By Jessica Goldstein, Published: July 15



(Astrid Riecken/ FOR THE WASHINGTON POST ) - Leigh Conner, right, and her partner Jamie Smith run Conner Contemporary Art, and believe DC is becoming a mecca for contemporary art.

Anyone who arrived at Conner Contemporary Art after 5 p.m. on July 9 had to stand in the back. Almost 200 people showed up to the night's event, a discussion panel and party for the (e)merge art fair, an exhibition of contemporary art that will take place in September at the Capitol Skyline Hotel.

This city long recognized for art that is old and historic is, it appears, becoming a hub for art that is bold and new.

Alice Denney, who founded the Washington Project for the Arts in 1975 and continues to be a regal fixture in D.C.'s art scene, was in attendance.

"There were two galleries when I started in 1957," she said, peering out at the gallery through round, red-tinted glasses. "I couldn't sell a Warhol, I couldn't sell a Jasper Johns. ... There was no audience."

That number has since skyrocketed. Leigh Conner, the gallery's owner and co-founder with Jamie Smith, estimates an all-encompassing tally of contemporary art galleries in the D.C. region would be over 75, from DIY spaces to commercial fine art exhibits to nonprofit shows.

As for the audience, all the chairs at CCA were full well before the panel began. Women holding Longchamp bags stood next to girls with tattoos for sleeves; men wearing Clark Kent glasses sat alongside people with peroxide extensions and glittery faces who looked like they'd gotten lost en route to a Lady Gaga concert.

New York City has the Armory Show. Art Basel Miami Beach is an institution. The Pulse Contemporary Art Fair is an annual event in Miami, New York and Los Angeles. Art Chicago just celebrated its 30th anniversary. Artists from around the world participate in these shows where a single piece of artwork can cost up to a million dollars.

Washington's attempts at a fair on this scale have been less than successful. ArtDC, 2007's effort, is often prefaced by the modifier "ill-fated."

"D.C. has always been perceived as an art and culture center," said Smith, Conner Contemporary's co-founder. "But not for contemporary art."

Until now.

Together with Helen Allen, the former executive director of the Pulse Contemporary Art Fair and founder of Pulse in New York and Miami, Smith and Conner founded (e)merge in October 2010. The fair will showcase the work of both nonprofits and galleries from around the world along with pieces by unrepresented artists. The plan is to make (e)merge an annual event — discussions about year No. 2 are underway — and, as Conner put it, "a place for discovery." At the Conner Contemporary booth, the price range will be from about \$1,000 to \$6,000.

"D.C. is not all about politics," said Conner. "D.C. is hungry, culturally."

Conner and Smith first met Mera and Don Rubell, the Miami-based art collectors whose family owns the Capitol Skyline Hotel, in 2002. As the Rubells became more involved in the D.C. art community, Conner, Smith and Allen came up with the idea for (e)merge.

"We brought the idea to Mera and Don," said Conner. "They were like, 'Oh wow! Give us two seconds to think about — yes!'"

"(e)merge is a very, very exciting happening," Mera Rubell said. "It's going to show the kind of vitality a living, working artist is experiencing in Washington."

"Leigh and Jamie's gallery has been there for a long time. But this will bring a new focus and celebration to D.C."

Like most things that appear to happen overnight, the explosion of contemporary art in Washington has been brewing for a while.

The roots of this movement can be traced back as far as Punk Art Show in 1978 and the Ritz Hotel Exhibition in 1983, but the first modern sign of a citywide passion for contemporary art probably came in 1999 at the first Artomatic.

Held in the Manhattan Laundry building in the U Street corridor, Artomatic is a nonprofit open-entry showcase for artists. Over six weeks, the first Artomatic drew 20,000 people to scope out the work of the 350 participating artists.

Conner Contemporary opened in 1999, followed two years later by the Fusebox Gallery on 14th Street NW, where Irvine Contemporary is currently located. Both brought what is generally recognized as a New York aesthetic to the District — big white walls, high ceilings, blank spaces — refining the DIY vibe that characterized the earlier exhibitions. In 2002, Victoria Reis and Jayme McLellan founded Transformer, a nonprofit visual arts organization dedicated to emerging artists and curators with a project gallery space on P Street NW.

As the number of spaces to see contemporary art in Washington multiplied, a new audience surfaced to see and purchase the works.

Martin Irvine, who had been collecting art for 20 years when he founded Irvine Contemporary in 2003, observed the demographic of collectors getting younger and younger. “You’d be surprised how many people just out of grad school are starting to buy art.

“They’re doing it because they’ve decided that, ‘Who needs another SUV in a driveway? I want something that’s about life and it lasts, something that’s part of my identity. Something that gives meaning beyond the ordinary things that we buy.”

Reis, one of the (e)merge panelists, now serves as Transformer’s executive and artistic director. If, as she said, “things have changed dramatically in contemporary art world in D.C. in the past 10 years,” the question becomes: Why? What happened in Washington?

Washington’s proximity to a handful of great art schools, such as the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore and Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Richmond, supplies the city with a constant stream of rising talent.

“D.C. is really seen on the map as a place where contemporary art is happening,” said Irvine, who works with dealers all over world. “It’s on a scale that’s being paid attention to outside D.C. I think we’ve got quite a bit of respect and credibility, much more than 10 years ago.”

Despite the groundswell of support for (e)merge, not every contemporary artist in D.C. wants to participate. The But is it art? fair, organized by Alex Ventura and Victoria Milko, is scheduled for the same weekend as (e)merge — intentionally.

“We don’t have a vendetta with anybody who is involved with (e)merge,” said Ventura. “But at the same, that’s top-down, and we want to do something that’s bottom-up. ... I think that

(e)merge fits in with the more institutionally oriented, more money-oriented current in contemporary art. [Our fair] is definitely a critique of that."

Naomi Beckwith, a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago who has worked at the Whitney Museum in New York and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, acknowledged the movement. "D.C. has definitely ... been folded into the circuit of institutions people visit to see contemporary art. There's been a big boom nationally and it's been based in cities."

Still, she said, "I think a lot of people's relationship to D.C. is more academic — they go down to see the Smithsonian. I don't know how many are going to look at artists and think about 'the scene.' ... For those who want to conquer the market, everyone wants to go to New York."

Conner and Smith are unfazed by comparisons to other cities. "We are what we are," said Conner. "We are of D.C."

Smith agreed. "D.C. is not going to be New York."

"People come here to be here," said Conner. "I wholeheartedly reject the idea that to make it as an artist, you have to be in New York."

"No one is saying that D.C. at the moment is the equivalent to the L.A. art center," said Rubell. "I think it would be reaching to say that. That's not the case. ... But what we all hope for (e)merge to reveal is how dynamic this D.C. community is."

"I think it is a big moment for contemporary art. Just the idea to have a focus on contemporary art in D.C. is, in itself, a big moment."