

# Forbes

## How CONNERSMITH Gallery is Turning Washington, D.C. Into Capital of Contemporary Art

By Marc E. Babej, Contributor  
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Multiverse, a light sculpture by Leo Villareal featuring over 21,000 custom-programmed LED nodes, located between the National Gallery of Art's East and West Buildings, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Ask just about anyone about [Washington](#) DC, and in all likelihood they could rattle off a list of things come to mind. Until recently, contemporary art would not have made anyone's list. But over the past decade, the art community in our nation's capital has also worked hard – and gone quite far – toward building a reputation as a capital of contemporary art. [New York](#), London or Paris needn't fear about their position quite yet, but Washington's progress is palpable – and much of it is owed to [ConnerSmith](#), a gallery that views the city's stature in contemporary art as a primary business objective.

The gallery is owned by Leigh Conner and Jamie Smith, and represents artists such as Leo Villareal, who just completed his Bay Bridge project in [San Francisco](#), and [Lincoln Schatz](#), whose project "The Network" is currently on display at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. I recently had an opportunity to speak with Conner and Smith about their growth strategy for their business and the vision for the D.C. art market.

Marc E. Babej: Let's start with the obvious question: Why Washington, D.C.?

Jamie Smith: The market here has become increasingly affluent, and also progressively younger in the past decade. The median age is now 34, which is younger than any of the states in the country. It's also one of the most educated markets in the country, so you have an abundance of young, wealthy, educated people living here.

Because we have a strong base of young collectors here, D.C. is benefiting from a trend throughout country: museums are now also actively interested in younger patrons, people who are 35-45, actively collecting, extremely philanthropic and culturally curious.

MEB: How is ConnerSmith benefiting from this trend?

Leigh Conner: We've been able to tap into exactly this market with our own gallery. I have expertise working with artists, patrons and marketing. Jamie has expertise and a Ph.D. in art history. In the 14 years of the gallery's existence, we've helped patrons build collections that make sense, also for their own legacies.

Many patrons here might have been fortunate enough to be part of a tech startup like AOL or [Google](#) – and, having been part of something that shape people's lives, they think in terms of their legacy. One way to do that is to form a collection of art that is relevant, and ultimately give it to somebody. [Philanthropy](#) is something that really sets this market apart, and the 35-45 year-olds here are among the philanthropists that will be shaping the collections in the big museums.

JS: We started out in 1999 in a 2<sup>nd</sup> floor walkup on Dupont Circle. We're now in a 12,000 sq ft building on Florida Avenue, NE. We run 5 cycles of shows a year, each with up to 4 solo shows. We do up to five big international art fairs the year, and also helped found the [Emerge art fair](#).

MEB: Tell me more about Emerge

LC: Emerge places a heavy focus on unrepresented artists. Their proposals are vetted by a committee of experts. For example, this year the committee is chaired by Molly Donovan, the curator at the National Gallery of Art. Then, 40-some artists get vetted into the fair and invited to exhibit for free. The fair supports unrepresented artists, young galleries, and young collectors, who are buying the first piece of art. We also host an international mix of established galleries like [Amstel Gallery](#) from Amsterdam, or Bitforms Gallery from New York City, which is renowned for digital art.

MEB: How does Emerge fit into ConnerSmith's vision?

JS: They're two sides of the same coin in our mind. Our vision as a gallery is very much about placing younger artists in the context of more established peers. We're very passionate about these young artists, and making sure their legacies are in museums. That's also why we like working with younger collectors, because they come to the market with a particular kind of joy of discovery.

MEB: How do you see the future of D.C. as a contemporary art market?

LC: Everybody comes through D.C. Now people are staying in D.C. Our vision is to convert them to the visual arts. The population of collectors here is very exciting, and we see its potential to shape the American art market today.