

(e)merge Art Fair Strives to Stir D.C.'s Art Scene

By Andrew Russeth 9/27 2:20pm



"I've never done a hotel fair before," Petra Leene, the director of Amsterdam's Amstel Gallery told us, sitting on her bed in a room on the second floor of the Capitol Skyline Hotel, in Washington, D.C. "I thought the purpose of a hotel fair was that you slept in your room. I didn't know!"

It was early on Saturday afternoon, the third day of the (e)merge Art Fair, and Ms. Leene was brimming with energy. "I sleep with my art," she said. "It's a new experience, but it's kind of nice." Many of the other exhibitors—80 in total, split roughly evenly between galleries and artists—had opted to stay in other rooms in the hotel, which is owned by the art-collecting Rubell family, who plan to open a contemporary art museum nearby.

Ms. Leene had arrived into town from the Houston Fine Art Fair, which, like (e)merge, had presented its inaugural edition this month. She had removed most of the furniture from the room, including one of its beds, and hung messy text paintings by Ruud de Wild and lush photographs of insects by Agniet Snoep against the room's pale yellow striped wallpaper.

It was about 1 p.m., and the fair was quiet, though the number of visitors slowly picked up throughout the day. We were told that the opening evening and even the day before had been raucous, filled with artists and local arts supporters. Most of the galleries involved were young or small or both, and their works carried low prices. There were few works beyond the low-four-figure range, and quite a number of pieces—drawings and prints, mostly—available for a few hundred dollars.

"We have had a couple of good sales, and a lot of very good contacts," said Walter de Weerd, of Brussels-based Nomad Gallery, who had removed all of his room's furniture, except for chairs and a desk, and filled it with small carved portraits by Aimé Mpane, who showed at the Smithsonian's African Art Museum back in 2009. The portraits were priced at \$2,500, and red dots hovered next to a few of them. With rooms going for \$4,700 apiece, Mr. de Weerd had likely covered his costs easily.

Mr. de Weerd met Leigh Conner and Jamie Smith, co-directors of Conner Contemporary, who organized (e)merge along with Helen Allen, at the Art Brussels fair, and they sold him on the idea of coming to D.C. "The name of my gallery is Nomad Gallery, so I have to prove it," he laughed. However, even with those low prices, not everyone had made sales. "We've had a lot of note takers," one gallerist told me, a comment that a handful of other exhibitors echoed. "D.C. would seem to have everything necessary for a successful fair," David Markus, of New York's Josée Bienvenu Gallery, told *The Observer*. Indeed, the surrounding area is filled with highly educated, upper-income people with plenty of exposure to art. But D.C. has never had a commercial art scene on the scale of New York or Los Angeles or Chicago. The area's collectors buy

elsewhere. A previous attempt at a fair, Art DC, held at the city's convention center in 2007, lasted only one year.

Biennvenu had secured two adjoining rooms and devoted one to a large-scale installation by Lebanese-American artist Annabel Daou, which was one of the few works priced in the five-figure range at the fair. "The State Department sent her work to the Cairo Biennale," Mr. Markus said, "so this was a perfect opportunity to show it here."

With a few exceptions, the caliber of the work on view at (e)merge seemed unlikely to draw major collectors and museum curators. But it could happen if D.C. develops a viable gallery scene (it will no doubt take time). Neighboring Baltimore, which has a fair amount of buzz and where a handful of artist-run spaces have caught national attention, doesn't hurt either.

Many dealers cited reasons for doing the fair beyond sales. "We thought that the galleries in D.C. needed a platform like this," said Amy Cavanaugh Royce, the director of Honfleur Gallery, which is based in the Anacostia neighborhood in D.C. "We wanted to support the fair. It is really well intentioned. There has been lots of interest and lots of enthusiasm. There's a really good vibe."

Karyn Miller, the director of visual arts at D.C.'s Flashpoint gallery concurred. "There's such a palpable energy here, which I don't feel very often in D.C.," Ms. Miller said. "It feels like we're part of something that's bubbling up." Flashpoint had also secured two rooms, and devoted one to a pinball machine and slot machines lovingly redesigned and repainted by Kenny George. With the curtains drawn and the lights turned off, the room glowed with light from the machines. It was gorgeous.

In the ground floor ballroom and in the basement park garage, artists, who had beaten out hundreds of other applicants, showed their art at no charge. Unfortunately, the work tended toward the sort of half-baked conceptual, performance and installation works that has become de rigueur in the artist sections of the more loosely curated art fairs.

However, the hotel, designed by architect Morris Lapidus, famed for his ritzy Miami Beach hotel, the Fontainebleau, had its charms. The stairwell to the basement featured shimmering blue tiling, and the pool looked refreshing, though it had no takers on our visit.

On Sunday, *The Observer* visited the Phillips Collection, the modern art museum founded by Duncan Phillips and his mother Eliza Laughlin Phillips in 1918. There were on view a trove of modern European works, half of Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series" (the other half resides at MoMA) and a small number of works by the Color Field painter Morris Louis, a onetime D.C. resident.

We had our (e)merge tote bag hanging over our shoulder and, two separate times, young museum attendants stopped us to ask if we had been to the fair. They had friends in the shows, and were enthusiastic to hear how it had been. (e)merge, it seemed, had tapped into latent enthusiasms, allowing people to show work and network, all commendable side effects.

"It's good for the art community here, because everyone eventually leaves," one of the women told us. We asked her about what she did for a living. "I'm an artist," she replied. "I'm going to leave."