

# Exploring the (e)merge art fair in Washington, DC

BY E. BRADY ROBINSON

LAST FALL, THE (E)MERGE ART FAIR debuted at Capitol Skyline Hotel in Washington, DC. Dedicated to showcasing international emerging art, (e)merge featured 80 exhibitors from 15 countries and attracted 5,500 fair visitors. The multi-platform fair

## THE RISING ART SCENE IN DC

The international art world has now focused on Washington, DC as a site for emerging art communities. DC is home to a large number of artists who choose to live and work in the District. In a study titled "Artists and Arts Workers in the United States," published by the National Endowment of the Arts<sup>1</sup>, DC has a population 10,243 artists, who collectively make up 3.1% of the labor force, the highest percentage in the nation. (New York artists make up just 2.3% of the New York City labor force.)

DC is also home to the nation's most affluent neighborhoods and ranks at the top of the nation's real estate market, combined with abundant job opportunities and a well-educated population. This provides a strong target audience positioned to help form a strong collector base for the emerging art market. In the past five years alone, dealers representing contemporary and emerging art have opened several new galleries throughout DC, including Heiner Contemporary, Civilian Art Projects, Curator's Office and Contemporary Wing. New gallery districts have also emerged, often led by female art dealers, such as Leigh Conner and Jamie Smith, in addition to savvy art nonprofits like Flashpoint Gallery, Transformer, Washington Project for the Arts and The Studio Visit.

<sup>1</sup>National Endowment for the Arts, "Artists and Arts Workers in the United States," 2005-2009, updated October 2011. <http://www.nea.gov/research/research.php?type=N>.

was created in response to the need for additional exposure for emerging artists, combined with meeting the resurgent appetite for emerging art from collectors. Organized by Leigh Conner and Jamie Smith, co-founders of Conner Contemporary, along with Helen Allen, former director of Pulse Art Fair, (e)merge was hosted by Don and Mera Rubell, the Miami-based mega-art collectors and owners of the Capitol Skyline Hotel. Mera Rubell was also among the selection committee for the fair.

(e)merge takes inspiration from other hotel fairs, such as Gramercy Park, the Times Square Show and Ritz Hotel Exhibition, all of which have introduced the careers of young galleries and artists to established and new collectors. Located within blocks of the National Mall, the National Gallery of Art, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and many Smith-

sonian museums, Capitol Skyline Hotel provided a cool, hip vibe for fair visitors. Galleries representing international emerging art were featured in guest rooms on the 2nd and 3rd floors. The Olympic-size pool and unique social spaces of the hotel were utilized by unrepresented artists and provided a platform for performance art, large-scale installations, panel discussions and opening night concerts. The hotel is also located across the street from the future site of a Rubell-owned hotel/museum in DC. With the endorsement of the Rubells and the brain trust of Conner Contemporary and Helen Allen, the fair was able to garner blue chip galleries, dealers and collectors who might have previously overlooked DC as site of emerging art market.

## Origins of (e)merge

The founders of (e)merge wanted to



PHOTO BY BRANDON WEBB PHOTOGRAPHY.

provide a place for new artists to be exposed to new and established collectors.

"It all started with the annual Academy exhibition, for M.F.A. and B.F.A. graduates in the Washington and Baltimore area," explained show co-organizer Jamie Smith in an interview with Pink Line Projects<sup>2</sup> in December 2010. "There are so many fantastic art schools in this region. We have learned from the past 10 years of showing over 200 emerging artists that a new platform was needed to help them start their career. Their options are very limited, even though some galleries in DC and nonprofit organizations show emerging artists. More opportunities are needed, particularly for international exchange. That is what we are trying to do, to attract vibrant international galleries, curators, collectors and artists who are all interested in new and emerging art."

The organizers' history of supporting emerging artists and championing contemporary art, combined with producing high caliber exhibitions, attracted a large number of supporters, artists and dealers, to the fair.

"I thought it would be a great opportunity to expose my work to a new audience and to connect with artists, gallerists and

collectors," said performance artist Holly Bass, who participated in the fair. "I also knew that Jamie, Leigh and Helen would produce a high quality fair and work really hard on behalf of the participating galleries and artists.

"The level of professionalism and organization was excellent. I made amazing connections with other artists and also was invited to perform my work at the Corcoran by Mera Rubell, which is completely awesome." (Holly performed a seven-hour solo performance February 11, 2012 as part of the closing

weekend of the *30 Americans* exhibition at The Corcoran Gallery of Art.)

### An Affordable Participation Price

The theme of the fair — emerging art — encouraged many new and prominent art dealers, and emerging artists, to participate. The accessibility of the price to participate didn't hurt either.

Artists without gallery representation were invited to submit proposals to exhibit at (e)merge for free, selected by an exhibition committee. To qualify, unrepresented artists could not have current gallery representation nor have had a solo museum exhibition. Selected artists were responsible for providing their own materials, transportation and accommodations. Exhibition space was given at no charge located in the public areas of the hotel including the parking garage, hallways, banquet rooms and hotel grounds.

Galleries and nonprofit organizations selected to exhibit were permitted to represent one to three artists in virtually any media (installation, photography, painting, new media, performance or sculpture). However, artists presented may not have had any solo museum exhibitions. Participating galleries were charged \$4,700 for a standard room/\$8,200 for a double. Non-profit organizations were offered a reduced rate of \$2,350. These price points were affordable compared to other similar art fairs in the U.S.

Mindy Solomon, of the Mindy Solomon Gallery, said: "I like the idea of being a part of a fair program that focuses on 'emerging artists.' The public needs to see how important it is to support new artists and new perspectives. It is an essential education process in order to cultivate the next generation of collectors."

### (e)merge takes inspiration from other hotel fairs, such as Grammercy Park.



Flashpoint Gallery, (e)merge, work by Lisa Dillin, Megan Mueller and Janell Olah.

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<sup>2</sup>Isabelle Spicer, "(e)merge, a new contemporary art fair in DC," The Pink Line Project (December 16, 2010). <http://pinklineproject.com/article/merge-new-contemporary-art-fair-dc>.



PHOTO BY MAX COOK.

"Triathlon of the Muses," performance by Kathryn Cornelius and Jeffrey Cudlin, poolside at (e)merge at Capitol Skyline Hotel.

Mary Early, Director of Hemphill Fine Arts, echoed the sentiment: "(e)merge differs from other international art fairs ... in every way imaginable. The audience was relatively local, the work displayed was primarily based in the Washington/Baltimore/New York area. The low cost of participating in the fair makes it accessible to emerging dealers."

### DC Flavor

While (e)merge included many international galleries, the fair did have a local flavor. Local art schools, including

### (e)merge provides new artists exposure to new and established collectors.

The price point of works of art stayed below \$3,000, a smart strategy to attract a new collector base and support young artists.

The Corcoran College of Art and Design featured a large-scale photographic and video installation by current B.F.A. photography seniors Allison Clarke and Sophia Eva Guerci. This was the first art fair

The Corcoran College of Art + Design and The Maryland Institute College of Art, featured select work by young artists.

for both artists.

"I loved the idea of new emerging artists and art galleries coming together and taking over two and a half floors of hotel space to create an eclectic and creative atmosphere," stated Guerci. "It's a refreshing way to introduce work to the public and allows people to interact and respond to it in a multitude of ways.

"There was an amazing turnout of people, which brought me a lot of exposure. This was my first experience being an active part of an art fair rather than a visitor; it was a great experience, and overall I thought the show was put together very intelligently and made the art accessible for everyone."

Allison Clarke agreed: "I was invited to enter work in the (e)merge art show by an open call email to students. I thought it was a really good opportunity and a chance to get my work out there for more exposure. I also felt it was a great event to be a part of, especially in its inaugural year. The exposure was the key benefit for me — just getting my work out there so that other people can view it, especially as a student.

"An additional benefit was getting access to the show and getting to work from all the other galleries in attendance. This was my first international art fair, but it left a great impression on me. I loved that I

could see work from many different galleries all concentrated in one place. I also was pleased to see that the focus of the fair was not only on represented artists, but that two floors were dedicated to unrepresented and student artists."

Local nonprofit arts organizations also recognized the importance of the fair.

"Not participating wasn't an option," explained Karyn Miller, Flashpoint Gallery and Director of Visuals Arts at CuDC.

"(e)merge is a national platform for emerging artists, and I knew that was an opportunity upon which Flashpoint had to capitalize. It drew tremendous audiences, and we met new supporters, artists and collectors. We were able to give exposure to our artists and programming far beyond what we can generally do in our physical gallery space.

"We did very well with price points under \$1,000. I wanted to present our two rooms as cohesive, curated exhibitions rather than a smattering of artworks by different artists. But that presented a challenge around creating opportunities for potential sales. So, we worked with Furthermore to publish a suite of prints by three of the artists we featured in one of our rooms. Those were available for \$250 each. We also had a small portfolio of works by artists we've shown at Flashpoint. Most of those works

were priced under \$1,000.”

## Performance Art

In addition to visual art, (e)merge presented a strong showcase of performance art, a medium often overlooked at other fairs. Kathryn Cornelius and Jeffrey Cudlin performed “Triathlon of the Muses,” which featured their own personal Battle of the Sexes, a two-person head-to-head competition/triathlon. The piece took place poolside at Capitol Skyline Hotel. Cornelius and Cudlin took on three very real tests of physical and mental stamina during the performance: They swam 750 meters in the hotel pool, pedaled 20 kilometers on stationary bikes and ran 5 kilometers on treadmills. In the weeks leading up to the showdown, the two artists kept separate Twitter training logs, and exchanged regular barrages of trash talk.

“A lot of what made the fair work was homegrown energy — the unrepresented artists and performers were the main event, as far as I was concerned,” explained Cudlin. “Also, my muscles were visibly bulging through my form-fitting triathlete garb. That was memorable. My bulging muscles have never been featured at Art Basel Miami.” (For more information about the performance, visit <http://jeffreycudlin.com/>

[triathlon-of-the-muses.html](http://triathlon-of-the-muses.html).)

Additional performances included *DC Cheer* by Kristina Bilonick. *DC Cheer* is a community building art project and featured a homegrown cheer squad consisting of artists and art enthusiasts cheering for the DC Art World. This project draws inspiration from Judy Chicago’s *C\*\*t Cheer* from 1970. The performance began with the squad cheering on artists, collectors and art supporters upon arrival opening night at (e)merge art fair. Cheers extended throughout hotel rooms and ended poolside in the evening. Visit <http://dccheer.org/about/> for more information about the project.

“The (e)merge art fair gave me the framework and support I needed to finally launch *DC Cheer!* — a project I had considered doing for a while,” said Bilonick. “It was the perfect audience for our debut, and I felt honored to be a part of the inaugural crew of emerging artists who presented performances and installations during the fair.”

## Positive Reviews for the Future

Reviews from fair participants were positive, especially in regard to outreach and impact.

“We were thrilled to participate in the fair,” said Flashpoint Gallery’s Karyn

Miller. “It was a great moment in the DC arts scene to be able to really pinpoint this moment of groundswell in the community. We’ve got vital, vibrant and relevant things happening here. DC is an active participant in contemporary artistic production and (e)merge really proved that. It allowed great experimentation while still feeling really professional, polished and curated.”

Performance artist Jeffrey Cudlin added: “I think it’s important that DC have some sort of legitimizing event like this, and I wanted to be a part of it to show my support, help create some sort of critical mass — particularly if there will be future incarnations.”

(e)merge 2012 has been scheduled for October 4 – 7, 2012. Deadline to apply for the next fair is Friday, April 27, 2012. For application guidelines, please visit <http://www.emergeartfair.com/exhibitor-services/>. Hope to see you in DC! **PA**

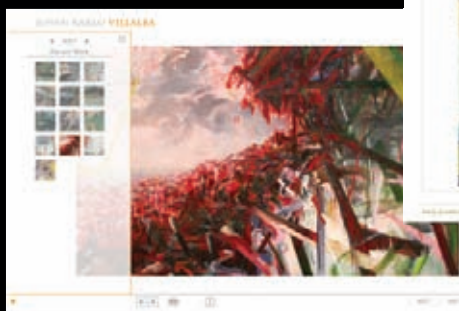
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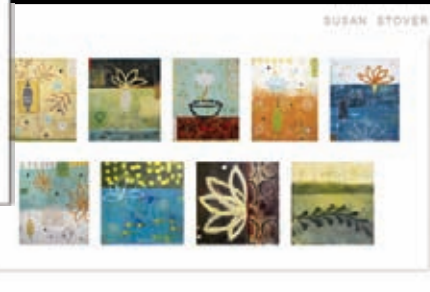
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