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Huger Philadelphia – Hungry by J.J. McCracken. Photo courtesy J.J. McCracken

(E)merge art fair adapts site's form and function

By [Philip Kennicott](#), Published: September 23

Jamming an ambitious new art festival into the [Skyline Hotel](#), an outpost of mid-century modern cool in Southwest D.C., was never going to be easy. Designed by the Miami architect [Morris Lapidus](#) in the early 1960s, the Skyline has small rooms, low ceilings, narrow hallways and conference space better scaled to a philately convention or mahjong tournament than a major art fair. But it has buzz and it's owned by the [Rubell family](#), who have emerged as major players in the Washington contemporary art scene.

So the more than 80 exhibitors at the debut of the (e)merge Art Fair, which opened Thursday night, were forced to adapt their displays, and sometimes the art, to spaces that were far from congenial. Electrical wires taped to the ceiling powered supplemental lighting. Windows were covered over to provide more wall space. One gallery covered the beds and furniture in black plastic garbage bags, making it look like a crime scene.

In Room 228 they were handing out flashlights to help visitors see the work of Aime Mpane, a Congolese artist who uses paint and roughly hewn plywood to create mask-like forms. In another

room, occupied by the Frankfurt-based Galerie Anita Beckers, the host began to despair as the sun set.

"I'm going to have to go out and get lights first thing tomorrow," she said. It was a shame. Hard to see in the gloaming were delicate and intriguing photographs by Christiane Feser, who uses multiple images and a complicated process of cutting and editing to create striking final prints, reminiscent of Mondrian and Moholy-Nagy.

Yet the hotel turned out to be both a challenge and boon for those bringing work to (e)merge, billed as Washington's latest best hope of creating an art fair that will gain international notice. Previous attempts have fizzled, and ongoing efforts to present unjuried art fairs, such as [Artomatic](#), have been popular but not critical successes. (E)merge is dedicated to younger, emerging international artists, vetted by committee, and it includes longtime D.C. gallerists [Leigh Conner and Jamie Smith](#) of Conner Contemporary Art among its organizers. Whether it challenges New York's Armory Show or Miami Beach's Art Basel will depend on whether it attracts a critical mass of people who actually buy art. But in terms of the quality of work on display, it has already moved the needle by Washington standards.

For all of the physical challenges presented by the hotel, it functioned as a social fishbowl, and a cruel but effective first test of the art on display. You could learn as much about the art by inhabiting the dead spaces as by following the opening night throngs. In the garage nobody seemed to be paying much attention to Adam Lister's "Brave New World," a construction of painted wood, string and metal pieces that looked a bit like a Rube Goldberg device as re-imagined by a De Stijl designer. A small but curious focal point in its long, horizontal construction was a model of an ancient pyramid site, made tenuous by nearby strings, taut and suspended in midair by small magnets. The work needs pruning, but it speaks clearly about the contingent nature of history, the chain of unlikely connections and accidents it takes for something ideal, or grand, or memorable to emerge and pass the test of time.

Other works simply got lost. Work hung in hallways tended to take on the feel of hotel art. Zach Rockhill, a Brooklyn-based artist, seemed intent on fighting the generic nature of hospitality space with a large gray block of concrete, bisected on an angle with a diaphanous curtain. It was big enough and odd enough to be clearly out of place, but it too struggled for presence in a room that also featured a tape loop of chanting, an appealingly decorative abstraction in gray, red and silver by Katherine Mann, and a complicated but opaque installation by James J. Williams III.

The fair is divided into two platforms: In guest rooms on two floors of the hotel, galleries presented selections from the artists they represent, while in social spaces on the ground floor, around the pool and in the garage, individual artists and some local art schools and organizations were given space. The social areas were freewheeling and tended more to conceptual and documentary work, performance and installation. Several artists focused on the social nature of the art world, conceived ideally as a place of intellectual and creative exchange. Jennifer Mawby, a Vancouver-based artist, covered a large wall with a grid of small trinkets, hanging on hooks. "Give and Take" invited viewers to take one of her strangely moustache-shaped curios and leave something behind in exchange. Many were leaving their business cards, a sad comment on Washington's inexhaustible supply of self-promotion.

The strongest work was in the gallery rooms, and not surprisingly, it was the most finely crafted, visually satisfying and tactile. Maskull Lasserre, represented by the Montreal-based Pierre-Francois Ouellette Art Contemporarain, carves things out of axe handles, including a finally detailed snake skeleton. Another work joins an axe with the tuning pins and scroll of a violin, thus

fusing one of the brute tools of civilization with one of its most refined. Jeremy Dean's work, seen in the room devoted to Aureus Contemporary, was political, but sharply conceived and beautifully executed. By unweaving fabrics representing the American flag, then stretching the remaining threads tightly above other images, Dean creates ghostly comments on the divided and rancorous state of the American polity. He also designs horse-drawn retrofits of gas guzzling cars, a laugh-out-loud comment on our shared and imminent dystopia.

The hotel layout, its long, shotgun halls crowded with people, creates a brutal, egalitarian environment. In four hours you might see everything twice. About ninety percent of it makes little impression. Five percent lingers, and a small percentage of the remainder will last and recall you for a third look. In today's contemporary art world, that's not a bad success rate.

(E)merge Art Fair, located at the Capitol Skyline Hotel, 10 I Street, SW, continues Friday and Saturday, noon to 7 p.m. and Sunday noon to 5 p.m. Admission is \$15. For more information visit www.emergeartfair.com