

The Washington Post

Going Out Guide

Published on *The Washington Post Going Out Guide*
(<http://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide>)

Art fair (e)merges with a long history

By Michael O'Sullivan
Published: September 26, 2013

The conventional wisdom is that the craze for contemporary art fairs — gatherings of art dealers that resemble conventions for the culturati — is a relatively new phenomenon. Jamie Smith disagrees.

Smith, an art historian and co-founder of Washington's (e)merge art fair, which opens Thursday at the Capitol Skyline Hotel, thinks that fairs like hers harken back to the late 15th century, when a group of Flemish artists set up stalls near the Antwerp cathedral to hawk their wares.

But Smith, who founded (e)merge in 2011 with Leigh Conner, her partner in [Connersmith Gallery](#), admits that things have changed a bit since 1480. For one thing, although individual artists are spotlighted throughout the hotel — in hallways, conference rooms, even the parking garage — art dealers make up a substantial chunk of the fair, transforming an entire floor of bedrooms into makeshift galleries, in some cases displaying art in bathrooms and inside dresser drawers.

To be sure, the marketing aspects of (e)merge can't be denied. Seasoned collectors attend, as do first-time buyers looking to get their feet wet. But there's a third category you'll see in even greater numbers: the gawker. Conner says a core part of the fair's mission is to present a "snapshot of what's out there," so even if you don't bring your checkbook, you should definitely bring your curiosity and your camera. (The Washington Post is a sponsor of the event.)

The fair has two main parts. There's what Conner and Smith call the gallery platform, which takes place on one of the hotel's upper floors. There you'll find a wide variety of exhibitors, from traditional commercial galleries to alternative nonprofit spaces that specialize in edgy art. The only criterion is that the artist not have had a solo museum show.

Then there's the artist platform. This is work scattered throughout the building and poolside by individual artists and performers, hand-picked by a vetting committee, and typically not represented by a gallery. Throughout the fair, many of the artists will be on hand to talk about their art.

It's less intimidating than it sounds, and kind of fun. Just bring an open mind as well as this guide to some of the fair's multifarious faces.

A 'Shining' example



In "Self Portrait as Jack Torrance," Andrew Wodzianski will type the phrase, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," over and over, for the duration of the fair

[Andrew Wodzianski](#) is a mighty fine painter, specializing in the fringes of pop culture, represented by Mexican wrestlers, B-movie weirdos and other outre subjects. But you'd never know that from his appearances at (e)merge, where both last year and this year his participation falls under the category of performance art.

It started in 2009, when, during the opening of Wodzianski's horror-movie-themed solo painting show at Flashpoint Gallery, he spent the entire reception inside a closed coffin. That was followed by a 2010 stunt in which he lived for two weeks inside a vacant U Street storefront, his fishbowl-like habitat visible from the street. At last year's (e)merge, the artist, 38, mimicked the fate of "[Moby-Dick](#)" narrator Ishmael by floating for 36 straight hours on a coffin in the middle of the hotel's pool, subsisting only on energy gel. (In case you're wondering, he used suppositories beforehand to avoid bathroom emergencies; holding his bladder was simply a matter of willpower.)

Wodzianski's evocation of literary figures continues this year at (e)merge with "Self-Portrait as Jack Torrance," another endurance exercise in which the self-described horror buff portrays the character made famous by Jack Nicholson in Stanley Kubrick's movie version of Stephen King's "The Shining." Look for him in the hotel lobby stationed behind a manual typewriter, pecking out the proverb "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" over and over, for every hour the fair is in session. Although that scene does not appear in King's novel, it is a pivotal moment in the movie.

Wodzianski's performance — in which the artist plays an actor playing a literary character who some have called a fictionalized version of King — is meant to call attention to what Wodzianski calls the "hierarchy of fiction." That might sound pretentious, but Wodzianski is okay with that. He admits that his work can be taken both seriously and as a cheeky critique of self-indulgent hoo-ha.

What Wodzianski is less comfortable with is people forgetting that he also knows his way around a canvas. “It’s a concern,” he says, although he has no plans to stop performing. For now, he says, the two mediums “scratch two different itches.”

Not just pretty pictures



Dutch photographer Agniet Snoep’s haunting photos of dead animals come courtesy of Amsterdam’s Amstel Gallery

The number and nature of (e)merge exhibitors has changed annually, with a greater emphasis this year on international galleries and local alternative spaces outnumbering traditional Washington galleries. One constant is [Amstel Gallery](#), a photography-focused space in Amsterdam that again will be showcasing the work of [Agniet Snoep](#), a Dutch photographer whose slightly creepy art has proved strangely popular every year. Although Snoep’s work has never sold during previous fairs, Amstel director Petra Leene says a significant number of inquiries have trickled in months later from buyers who remember the work from (e)merge.

Snoep, a distant relative of 17th-century Dutch painter Ambrosius Bosschaert, will be represented by her eerily beautiful photos of dead animals that appear to be sleeping. The images will be presented alongside [Claire Felicie](#)’s black-and-white portraits of young Dutch marines before, during and after tours of duty in Afghanistan; and [Marc Babej](#)’s black-and-white shots of beautiful young women whose faces are marked by a plastic surgeon’s pen.

Snoep’s surreal — even disturbing — style is a good fit for the fair, says Leene, who describes the vibe in the mid-century modern hotel, designed by Morris Lapidus, as evocative of David Lynch’s bizarre 1990s television series “Twin Peaks.” The description is apt; there’s an ineffable weirdness (in a good way) to wandering around hotel rooms filled with video, performance and oddball installations.

Present Company, inclusive



(Larry Cook / Present Company) Brooklyn's Present Company Gallery will be showcasing the photography of Washington artist Larry Cook

One of the first-time exhibitors at this year's fair is Brooklyn-based [Present Company](#). Described by co-director Jose Ruiz as part gallery and part social space, Present Company will be showcasing a surprisingly diverse group of artists. At one end of the spectrum is emerging Washington photographer [Larry Cook](#), a 2013 graduate of George Washington University's art school. At the other end is [Alan Turner](#), a 70-something stalwart of the New York painting world since the late 1960s. In the middle is mixed-media artist [Shanti Grumbine](#) of New York.

Ruiz curates Present Company's eclectic programming, which includes screenings, music, discussions and other events, with artists Brian Balderston and Chad Stayrook. Ruiz and Balderston are known to the Washington art scene from their days with former District art collective Decatur Blue. Both agree that (e)merge offers two distinct benefits for their fledgling business, which opened in late 2010. On the one hand, it's a way to let their D.C. peeps know what they've been up to. On the other, it's preparation for the Untitled art fair, one of many prestigious satellite art fairs that will take place in December around the colossal [Art Miami](#) fair.

Ruiz and Balderston are quick to note that they don't view the (e)merge audience as a dry run for Miami but as a healthy population of collectors, museum and gallery professionals and other art-world players in its own right. They're looking forward to, as Ruiz says, "broadening the arena" in which Present Company competes.

Come on in, the water's fine (art)



D.C. performance art-veteran Holly Bass will use the swimming pool to perform a secular baptism

Performance art has always been a key component to (e)merge, with much of it taking place around — and in some cases in — the hotel swimming pool, which affords adventurous performance artists an especially dramatic stage. Veteran D.C. performance artist [Holly Bass](#) is one of this year's participants who will be getting wet. The first piece of her two-part "Revival" features a poolside performance structured like a worship service in the tradition of an African American Baptist church (Saturday at 3:30 p.m.). That will be followed by a secular "art baptism" (Sunday at 2:30 p.m.) in which Bass will dunk volunteers in the deep.

Bass says her piece, which uses singing, music and testimonials to evoke a Southern tent revival, is meant to underscore how some people treat art like religion. She also hopes no one will take offense at the work, which is not meant to be sacrilegious. "It's about how we identify ourselves as art lovers," she says. "What need does art satisfy in us? What draws us to it?"

Because she'll be in the pool, Bass is hoping for warm temperatures Sunday. (Her plans for those being baptized to be naked were nixed by the hotel.) But just as she can't control the weather, she admits she can't control whether the art-world faithful will get her message.

Even if they don't, Bass says, "it could just be a beautiful spectacle."

Spirit of togetherness



The artist-run Pleasant Plains Workshop will showcase the work of its 11 resident artists, including Ann-Marie VanTassell, whose photo “Travis and Jackson” is shown above

Today’s art ecosystem is diverse, including not just traditional museums and galleries, but also pop-up spaces, collectives, nonprofit groups and other hybrid, hard-to-define ventures. This year, a corner of the fair will be reserved to showcase four representatives of the art world’s frontiers.

Two groups are from Baltimore: [Print/Collect](#), which publishes editioned prints, and [Sophia Jacob](#), a small, conceptualist-focused exhibition/performance space. Two are from Washington: performance-art presenters [Animals & Fire](#) and [Pleasant Plains Workshop](#).

Artist Kristina Bilonick founded Pleasant Plains Workshop in 2010 as a shared gallery, shop, studio space, classroom and incubator for artists and creative entrepreneurs. The artist, whose own work runs from inexpensive T-shirts to commercially risky art installations, says she wouldn’t have been able to afford to participate in (e)merge without spreading the cost among the workshop’s 11 “residents,” one of whom runs [Spinagram](#), a start-up offering personalized gifts in the form of hand-lettered vinyl records.

The workshop’s collective business model manifests itself in a DIY spirit. Just as the group shares expenses at its Georgia Avenue home, its members plan on staffing its (e)merge booth in 2¹ / 2-hour shifts. Contrast that with Amstel Gallery’s Leene, who will be on her feet all day and then collapse at night from exhaustion in the same hotel room she’s using as her booth by day.

Pleasant Plains Workshop’s survival strategy also is apparent in the group’s art wares, which include everything from inexpensive, wearable art to pricier, more serious examples of what Bilonick calls “the kind of stuff you hang on the wall.”