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(e)merge art fair: It's the biggest game in town for contemporary artists. Does it marginalize them, too?

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“Untitled (Columns)” and “Untitled (Medallion)” by Magali Hébert-Huot (2013-2014)

Last Saturday afternoon, as bright summer day gave way to brisk autumn evening, a group of artists and friends gathered for a housewarming ritual in Southwest. Singer Liz Andrews led a soft call-and-response with the two-dozen-or-so folks perched on wooden crates outside a small shed structure erected on the lawn of the Capitol Skyline Hotel. “I’m buildin’ me a home,” she sang, evoking an old Negro spiritual. Andrews, poet Ernesto Mercer, and hand drummer Matthew Miller led the chorus as part of Holly Bass’ “Black Space Housewarming,” one of a suite of performances conducted by the artist for the (e)merge

art fair last weekend.

Situated near the sidewalk in front of the hotel, the piece unexpectedly intersected with a different kind of ritual in Southwest. Dozens of Washington Nationals fans walked around, past, and even through “Black Space Housewarming,” some of them stopping in their tracks at the sight of four performers dressed like freedmen blessing a modest home through song. (Unsuspecting Nats fans didn’t know it at the time, but they were heading to a grueling piece of durational performance of their own: an 18-inning loss in the division series against the San Francisco Giants, a game that stretched more than six hours.)

It would be hard to build a better microcosm for (e)merge than Bass did with “Black Space,” a series of performances centered around building a literal space for black artists and black voices in an increasingly white D.C. Now in its fourth year, (e)merge is where restive narratives like Bass’ come together: D.C. artists trying to find a berth in the national art scene. A neighborhood striving to connect to the cultural infrastructure of Washington. An art fair still aiming for a place on the international circuit. With this year’s (e)merge fair, the D.C. art scene was looking for a win.

About one quarter of the work on view was worth seeing. That’s average for art fairs, which are much closer in kind to a trade show than a museum exhibition. Bass and another D.C. artist, Sheldon Scott, came away with performances that pushed their practices. The best work was the sculpture sequestered in the basement parking garage, although a handful of pieces stuck out among the paintings that dominated the hotel rooms. However, this year’s (e)merge was in many ways more notable for what was said about art than what was done with it.

The (e)merge fair couldn’t have asked for more from Southwest this year. Just blocks away from the Capitol Skyline Hotel, the lowbrow G40 art festival was closing down with a block party at the old Friendship Baptist Church, which it adopted in 2013 (with a full building mural wrap by the Atlanta artist Hense). The 5x5 Project, a public-art festival spread across D.C., is still in full effect (with the best work stacked in “Nonuments Park” in Southwest). During (e)merge, there was plenty of art to see in the neighborhood, albeit art of an ephemeral, low-impact, pop variety. Southwest is still an island isolated by freeways, but it gets easier for art-fair tourists to navigate every year.

As in past years, the three-day, four-night (e)merge art fair planted performance art in the Capitol Skyline Hotel’s front yard, basement garage, second-floor rooms, and poolside patio, though there were noticeably fewer performances on the docket than in past years. The fair’s founding directors, Leigh Conner and Jamie Smith (a third founder, Helen Allen, left the fair in 2012), recently sold their Connersmith gallery space in Trinidad to the Capital Fringe Festival. What once felt like an extension of the gallery program now feels more like dressing for a commercial art fair.

The artist platform nevertheless makes (e)merge worth attending. To that end, sculpture gained ground on performance this year. A trio of

Baltimore artists led the charge in a mini-exhibition in the underground level. Jim Leach's highly polished cast-resin pieces married high and low, especially in one lightless black resin rectangular prism suspended from a makeshift wooden platform. Magali Hébert-Huot's cast-wax medallion was my favorite thing in the fair; her wax Doric capitals, erected on an engineered wood particleboard column, struck the same unmonumental note. Zack Ingram's 2-D textile installation provided contrast and balance.

One of the most popular works in the fair was Sui Park's "s(h)ell", a set of zip-tie sculptures made in the shape of sea cucumbers and in the mold of Tara Donovan post-minimalism—always a crowd-pleaser. I was pleasantly surprised by another figure in the hotel's lobby level: At-Large D.C. Councilmember David Grosso, who introduced Arts Action, an arts coalition seeking better and more consistent arts funding from the Council. Grosso's address might've served as the hopeful keynote for (e)merge, which is by default the bellwether of the D.C. art scene.

Meanwhile, James Bernard Cole punked the whole enterprise. In "That Corcoran Status," a piece that can only be described as haphazard, he and some art-bros erected a mock hunting blind on the hotel patio, decked out the way that the over-the-top George Washington University frat boys of their nightmares might do it. Nudie posters and a Washington football team flag hanging on the walls added to the sensational shock, a kind of *Revenge of the Nerds* vision of GW life. Cole and his buddies sat around, chowing on pizza and swilling Budweisers. Sitting ducks in the pool (decoys) rather hamfistedly symbolized the students at the Corcoran College of Art + Design, but that's so obvious as to be beside the point.

Rather, I think "That Corcoran Status" and "Black Space" alike point with some alarm to dramatic changes in D.C. Gallery space is declining, housing costs are soaring, the Corcoran Gallery of Art is gone: D.C. artists are being pushed out to the margins. At the (e)merge art fair, artists are literally marginalized. It's beneficial to fair owners and local artists alike, to be sure, but hosting art nevertheless still comes second to selling it. To be fair to (e)merge, most art fairs don't even bother to give artists a stage. But if D.C. artists are taking to it with pieces that express some anxiety, there's good reason for that.

Yes, (e)merge is good for local artists. But the wellbeing of the local community isn't its priority: It's ultimately a fair, a marketplace, not a nonprofit festival or collective or incubator. So when Grosso says that he would like to see (e)merge expand to fill the convention center, I wonder whether he or anyone on the Council is thinking hard about artists beyond their role as economic engines for changing neighborhoods. When Bass and Cole use the platform of (e)merge to (very softly) occupy the fair, that's the reason: There are so few places left for them to go.