



Artropolis: Art Chicago

September 13th, 2007



by Megan Voeller

If you can't beat 'em, buy 'em.

With words to that effect, Christopher G. Kennedy welcomed gallery owners and collectors to a Saturday breakfast at Artropolis, the umbrella brand for an art market extravaganza that included Art Chicago and four other fairs in downtown Chicago's Merchandise Mart.

At the breakfast, Kennedy announced plans for his company, Merchandise Mart Properties, Inc. (MMPI), a property management and tradeshow-producing firm and owner of both the Mart and Art Chicago, to buy the parent companies of New York's Armory Show and European fair VOLTA. The ambitious plan, Kennedy reasoned, would help put Art Chicago back on the map.

The Midwestern fair was ripe for a comeback. For over a decade, founders Thomas Blackman Associates ran the annual event until debt and other problems mounted to a critical point in 2006, days before Art Chicago was set to open. Kennedy's company, on the receiving end of a call for help, managed to relocate the fair to the Mart - complete with new, rush-printed invitations and advertisements. Then MMPI bought the fair outright. A year later, exuding enthusiasm for the acquisition, Kennedy ticked off evidence of his company's efforts to shepherd Art Chicago to new heights: from including satellite fairs Bridge, Intuit and The Artist Project, as well as the Mart's International Antiques Fair, to issuing hundreds of VIP passes and perks.

And in fact, the four-day (five-day, counting vernissage and media previews) event did come off, more or less, like a well-oiled machine. From the efficiently staffed elevator service that whisked visitors up and down floors at the Mart to the champagne-dispensing VIP bars, the Artropolis experience carefully coddled collectors. Whether they bought anything as a result is an entirely different question - and the source of some grumbling by gallery owners on the QT. But amid the predictable and the flashy - enough Jim Dine bathrobes to clothe Bea Arthur in perpetuity; strange, concrete-colored self-portrait heads by Jaume Plensa, odds and ends by Josef Albers; Lucio Fontana and Andy Warhol; and the inevitable homages to Sol Lewitt (whom we adore) - there was even some interesting and new art to see.

Unsurprisingly, much of it hailed from New York, though Chicago galleries were looking good, too, especially at Bridge. (More about that later.)

At Art Chicago, the booth of Chelsea's Jack Shainman had the rigor of a curated show, with El Anatsui's metal curtain-paintings (made of discarded aluminum and copper wire) striking up a lively conversation with Chicago-based Nick Cave's beaded soundsuits (an eerie marriage of Klu Klux Klan hoods and Broadway costuming) and paintings by Kerry James Marshall. The crowd took note, filling Shainman's nook with the energy of a cocktail party while other dealers manned sterile closets of art. Giant pizza boxes and Chinese take-out containers by Jonathan Seliger helped set the fun tone.

Not to be outdone, Roebling Hall offered Eve Sussman's two-channel video, *Bathers* (in collaboration with the Rufus Corporation), an ennui-saturated showcase of poolside babes, and a sad, fragmented American flag puzzle by Christoph Draeger. Amer Kobaslija's painstaking oil rendition of a janitor's closet - courtesy George Adams Gallery - turned ick-factor and claustrophobia into a startling experience of beauty. And at Susan Inglett Gallery, everything was an understated treat, from Shaun O'Dell's playful gouache-and-ink abstractions to Hope Gangloff's oversized pen-and-ink drawings of French can labels.

From across the pond, Frankfurt's Galerie Martina Detterer shone with paintings in themed series (trash, hairdos and oysters) by Cornelius Voelker and Kirsten Mosher's whimsical-yet-disturbing acrylic paintings on aluminum suggestive of cartoon disaster scenes. In a booth next door, Galerie Anita Beckers, also of Frankfurt, reaffirmed its reputation as a source for strong new media works with, among other wonders, drawings and video by Spanish artist Amparo Sard detailing the travails of an Alice in Wonderland-type girl subject to drowning and other fantastical discomforts.

Things got a bit spicier at Bridge, the smaller fair for emerging and new contemporary art that originated in Chicago and has expanded to London and Miami. Organized by Michael Workman, arts editor of *Newcity*, Chicago's alt weekly, Bridge was a mixed bag at times but rife overall with gems for the collector buying at a lower price point than Art Chicago's.

Here hometown galleries, especially those from the city's Fulton Market district, looked sharp. Landscapes - subtle and patterned in oil paint by Kim Curtis or in techno-baroque collages of bling by Sandra Bermudez - worked at Kasia Kay Art Projects Gallery. **At rowlandcontemporary, the booth was almost too full of treasures to parse them each individually: John Arndt's crystallized cowboy hat, Todd Mattei's tear-in-the-space-time-continuum digital landscapes and Carrie Moyer's richly symbolic paintings among them.**

Southerners made a good showing, too. Atlanta's romo gallery offered recent drawings by Alex Kvaes, whose psychedelic-organic landscapes are nearly hypnotic to behold. Miami's Dorsch Gallery presented a delightfully meta-portfolio of photographs by Tim Walker; the color-saturated images showcased tacky and often hilarious commercial paintings from buildings in Wynwood, a former shoe-and-fashion district where art galleries have accumulated and gentrification has followed. (The photos, accidentally or not, seemed to comment on the transformative power of the art market on urban renewal. Needless to say, harnessing some of the frenzy Miami has benefited from was a question very much on people's minds at Artropolis.)

Outside the Mart, a Sunday brunch gallery walk gave visitors an even closer look at Chicago's finest. **Less crowded at rowlandcontemporary's gallery space, the whole series of Moyer's paintings, called "Black Gold," were even more striking without distractions; here, they revealed the painter nose-deep in the creation of a unique personal, political and sexually-infused symbolism.** At NavtaSchulz Gallery, David Packer's oversized sculptures of engines and anatomically correct hearts charmed, as did Judith G. Levy's wheat paste-style installation of fun-loving banshees along Lake Street.

Whether Kennedy and company will be able to nurture Artropolis with enough cash to stimulate an arts-and-culture scene - or market - on par with Miami Basel remains to be seen. To the visitor, it was apparent that Chicago's organic contemporary art community is alive and kicking.