



A monthly commentary on art & the city by columnist Taylor Jonnes.

When All is 'Fair' in Art and Love

Not Dallas Basil . . . they called it the Dallas Art Fair. And all in all it was an interesting affair that attracted some estimated 5,000 people, everyone watching the city's cognoscenti watching each other viewing some very lovely, albeit expensive, art. As a Dallas Country Deputy Sheriff providing site security put it when I asked him what he thought about "all this": "I don't think about it; I just watch."

The premier DAF happened on February 6–8, 2009, the weekend that falls between Groundhog Day and Lincoln's birthday. I know Lincoln attended plays and music recitals. But did he have an interest in art? And what about Punxsutawney Phil? Where do his tastes lie? If anything, the weekend was probably a prelude to Valentine's Day, that is if you love good art. It was a sweet set-up. DAF took place in the Fashion Industry Gallery, 1807 Ross Avenue, next door to Stephen Piles's classy eatery. Visitors were enticed by a display of sculptures in the small park between Ross and the F.I.G. building. The weather was mild, with high-scudding clouds. Valet parking was offered and accepted. (Valet parking is so ubiquitous in Dallas; sometimes I think it was invented here.)

DAF consisted of thirty-nine galleries, *mas o menos*, mostly from NYC with a smattering from other jurisdictions: San Francisco, Santa Fe, Charlotte (NC), Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, Saint Louis, Houston, and Austin. Most local galleries were priced out of the market. From the Metroplex, just Dunn & Brown, Valley House, Artspace 111, and Kristy Stubbs participated. On Sunday afternoon one New York dealer told me it cost him \$50,000 to attend DAF, including the booth fee, art transport, and air/hotel/meals. He also said he hadn't sold a single piece of art all weekend.

Much of the art for sale at DAF soared at the high end of the market, like works by David Bates, Cy Twombly, Wolf Kahn landscapes, and breathtaking Elger Esser photographs. Prices started at \$50,000 and climbed to \$185,000 or more. A tiny Martin Puryear *Untitled* (Falcon) took the cake with a price tag of \$265,000.

Then there were the dead artists: a Raphael Soyer nude, \$60,000; an early Mark Rothko scene of the New York subway, \$1.2 million; an exquisite Arthur Dove oil for \$850,000. The saddest moment came when I stumbled upon one of the oddy adult, childish drawings of outside artist Henry Darger, a mural 24" x 106" of a group of identical-looking young girls in school dresses playing in a field. Henry Darger, reclusive and disturbed, haunted by his abused childhood and tormented by schizophrenia, left behind a huge cache of outré and disturbing drawings at his death. For forty years he lived in the same rented room, on the edge of poverty, working as a janitor. The asking price for Darger's mural drawing today: \$225,000.

Several dealers told me the New York art market was as dead as a pigeon hit by a Broadway bus. Yet another burst bubble. So here they were in the heartland, hoping against hope that they'd turn up some wealthy Dallas art enthusiasts who hadn't heard about the layoffs at Sotheby's or the bear market.

When I inquired at another New York gallery booth about a 15-inch square Gerhard Richter abstract consisting of juxtaposed squares of brilliant colors, the dealer said it was sold. List price: \$225,000. So, even if a 15 or 20 percent discount was given, at least one gallery covered its costs plus a bit extra. Only the insiders who organized DAF know whether this was the exception or the rule. But in general the dealers, most pleasant and outgoing, a few snooty, pretentious and standoffish, seemed to project a dower mood, hovering anxiously, as the viewers drifted tentatively in and out of their display spaces.

If you didn't have a quarter million to drop, there were still some great opportunities to walk away from DAF with some wonderful art in hand. Several galleries in the fair specialized in small-run etchings by both emerging and known artists.



An etching (from a run of 65) by the notorious Damien Hirst of rows of different colored dots each with the diameter of a jumbo gumdrop particularly caught my fancy. The price was a mere \$17,000, though it was neither blood splattered nor jewel encrusted.

Austin's Art House offered its trademark 5" x 7" pieces created by known and unknown artists at only \$100 a pop. Even gallery spaces featuring mostly high-end works by Twombly, Rauschenberg, and the like offered the occasional bargain. David Brown's intriguing map of China formed by hundreds of tiny hand-drawn red eyes could be had for a \$7,000 song.

Inevitably some bad art crept into the fair, though this was the exception. One gallery offered super-realist paintings of fast cars and a bare-breasted pinup girl emerging from a Butterfinger candy wrapper. Another gallery featured a photograph of a baby covered in tattoos. Such lapses in taste were actually welcome comic relief from the overly serious atmosphere that at times pervaded the affair.

On Sunday DAF organized an 11 a.m. symposium for early risers by a panel of gallery owners and collectors to kick-start the final day of the fair. Though this event drew a capacity crowd, it seemed far too extemporaneous, with a resulting lack of focus. I observed several aficionados in the audience nodding off and afterwards overheard a fair amount of grumbling.

Be that as it may, Marguerite Hoffman, the quintessential Dallas art collector on the panel, was wonderfully entertaining. When asked how she first became involved with the art world, she described a trip to Italy in college during which she was "stuck dumb by a Roman aqueduct," by the aesthetics of such a miraculous ancient structure. Later in the program, Marguerite described the process of selecting great art as being "not unlike finding a spouse. It needs to wear well over time. It must have a sense of humor. And one should acquire it only if, when you wake up the next morning, you can't live without it."

As I thought back on the three-day marathon event, with its fashionable participants, mostly exquisite art, and hopeful dealers, one particular painting on display seemed to sum up from a very Texas point of view the entire business of collecting art. The painting, by the realist painter Bo Bartlett, showed a young man in country attire, his young, pretty wife and son standing in front of a pickup truck. The young man held a hunting rifle braced against his leg. Draped over the truck cab lay a trophy deer.

So, whether you look for art at high-end art fairs or low-end yard sales, in trendy galleries or antique malls: Good hunting! Or as Marguerite Hoffman put it when asked whether a beginning art collector should have a professional adviser: "Just because you don't have a swimming buddy doesn't mean you shouldn't jump in the pool."



from left: Larissa Pineda, Selena MacKay; Vivian & Alberto Lombardi, Terri Provencal; Patricia Meadows, Carol Mead