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From bearish to bullish, Dallas Art Fair welcomes the world

By Michael Granberry



/Cris Worley Fine Arts
Patti Oleon's Holy Bravado is oil on linen.

Chris Byrne and John Sughrue are rolling lucky sevens with the Dallas Art Fair.

They co-founded the extravaganza during the economic woes of 2009, but its seventh season, which opens to the public on Friday and rolls into next Sunday, is, as they say with a bullish pride, bigger and better than ever.

This year, the fair will welcome to Fashion Industry Gallery (next to Stephan Pyles' flagship restaurant) almost 100 national and international art dealers, with reps arriving from 31 cities. Foreign burgs sending galleries to the fair include Hong Kong; Paris; London; Rome; Helsinki; Berlin; Brussels; Mexico City; Tokyo; Milan; Toronto; Vancouver; Antwerp, Belgium; Nuevo León, Mexico; and Bogotá, Colombia.

Byrne grew up in Philadelphia, Sughrue in Boston, a pair of hockey aficionados from Irish Catholic families. Both came here about 20 years ago and share in common a passion for all things Dallas that extends, of course, to their fast-growing baby, the fair.

“Chris is our rarefied art professional,” Sughrue says. “I look at it as a city-building aspect.” The aspiration of the city, he says, “is to be a cultural destination. Dallas has always been a juggernaut of commerce. Culture follows commerce. That day has arrived, and the fair has been a catalyst.”

It's hard to dismiss what he says as mere boosterism. His claims get support from recent extraordinary events in the Dallas arts community: Edith O'Donnell giving \$17 million to the University of Texas at Dallas for an institute of art history; the Meadows Foundation giving \$45 million to Southern Methodist University, with \$25 million going to the Meadows Museum and \$20 million to Meadows School of the Arts; and the Nasher Sculpture Center announcing this past week a \$100,000 annual award for the best in international sculpture.

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The Dallas Art Fair loves such local institutions, its founders say, with events scheduled at the Dallas Museum of Art, the Power Station, Dallas Contemporary, the Pump House, the Meyerson Symphony Center, the Goss-Michael Foundation, the Nasher and even AT&T Stadium, where Sughrue says visiting dignitaries will be allowed to go on the field and kick footballs.

Since 2009, the fair has grown from 3,500 attending to its current draw of more than 10,000. Sughrue and Byrne hope to see future attendance swell to at least 25,000.

Their intent was not to lure a guest list made up of 30 percent of its dealers coming from international galleries, but they will happily take it.

“It’s a testament to what’s happened in the local community with institutions and collectors,” Byrne says.

Yet, in some respects, the fair is rapidly becoming a victim of its own success. Sughrue says it has outgrown its 80,000-square-foot venue and may move as early as next year.

“We are landlocked,” he says.

“We have literally and figuratively,” Byrne says, “hit the wall.”

They are shopping for a new location, one that will greatly exceed the 10- to 12-foot ceiling height at Fashion Industry Gallery. Sculpture in particular often demands the highest reach possible.

They have come a long way from knowing if they could even pull off an art fair to worrying about ceiling height. Both say they developed the fair because they live here and wanted to attend something like, well, the Dallas Art Fair. As Byrne points out, Picasso once said he would have been a collector had someone been painting paintings like his.

With growth comes responsibility, so Sughrue and Byrne established a foundation three years ago, with proceeds from the annual gala going largely to education.

“We have given away more than half a million dollars,” Sughrue says.

And yet, he says, “it’s still a moment of commerce. It’s important to any art fair that art gets sold.” He and Byrne have never released sales figures, but it’s obvious that, as the fair grows, so do its sales. Galleries don’t come here from all over the world because they want to see Southfork Ranch.

Dallas artist Pamela Nelson unveiled a show last year at a local gallery called “The Pink Bazaar.” She dolled up the Dragon Street venue to look like a bazaar and a booth at an art fair. “The arrangement,” she said at the time, “mimics the sacred art booth, which is repeated throughout the world as collectors worship at the art fair cathedrals.”

It’s hard to argue with her description, no matter how critical. Collectors now come happily to Dallas, where even in the bear market of 2009, galleries found an economic oasis near the Trinity.

“When we launched, it was in retrospect absolutely the worst time imaginable,” Sughrue says.

“But while it was the worst time imaginable, things were better here. Art dealers, like everyone else, *were* trapped in a bear market. But they came to Dallas and found new collectors. Let’s face it, it’s a young American city, and people here do buy art.”

As Sughrue says, “We’re not an alien spaceship that drops down. It’s now a yearlong conversation about what’s happening this year at the Dallas Art Fair, and we are thrilled about that.”

Plan your life

The Dallas Art Fair opens to the public Friday at Fashion Industry Gallery, 1807 Ross Ave., Dallas. Friday and Saturday, it’s open from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m; April 12, from noon to 6 p.m. \$25, with a \$50 ticket covering admission to all three days. dallasartfair.com 214-220-1278.