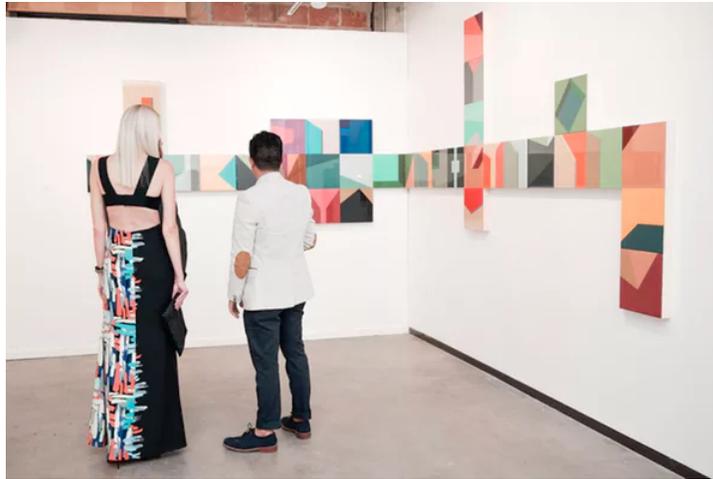


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Eight years in, Dallas Art Fair reaches an international peak

Michael Granberry



Jeremy Epstein lives in London. But he loves flying to North Texas each April for the Dallas Art Fair. He revels in the chance to chow down on “the world’s best Tex-Mex” and groove out on heavy metal in Deep Ellum.

This will be the third April in a row that Epstein has journeyed from the vaunted Edel Assanti gallery in London to Fashion Industry Gallery on Ross Avenue, where the fair will open its eighth edition on Friday. It closes next Sunday.

He flies to art fairs all over the world, including such heavyweights as Art Basel and Frieze New York, but when it comes to Dallas, “We don’t make any secret,” he said, “that it’s our favorite.”

He loves the trip to Texas because the gallery ownership feels valued, he says, by the fair’s enterprising co-founders, art curator and consultant Chris Byrne, 51, and businessman John Sughrue, 55. Epstein credits the pair with staging both an engaging fair and cultivating extracurricular activities that enhance the work of dealers.

More than any fair anywhere in the world, he says, the Dallas Art Fair facilitates after-hours, off-campus liaisons with the city's "rich supply" of collectors and museum heads that he says help sustain and embolden the careers of a gallery's artists.

It did not happen overnight. The Dallas Art Fair has grown dramatically since its ever-so-humble beginnings in 2009, when its inaugural chapter took place during the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

Byrne calls it launching the maiden voyage "three months after the world ended." Sughrue says he and Byrne often "joke that it was one part naivete and one part courage that got us in the business. Little did we know when we launched in 2009 what we were up against."

And yet, convening an art fair in such austere times may have given the pair a silver lining that, as much as any one factor, helps explain its current success.

"In a bull market, people are not as motivated to try new things," Sughrue said. "But in the economic downturn, people had to reinvent themselves. That's what happened in Dallas, and I would say, yes, in retrospect, that really helped the fair."

Nearly a decade later, the Dallas Art Fair will host 97 galleries from 41 cities around the world, making the 2016 version easily the most international in its history. Galleries are coming from, among other cities, Barcelona, Paris, Milan, Brussels, Zurich, Vienna, Antwerp, Hong Kong, São Paulo and Dubai.

The peak of the fair's success comes at a time when Dallas itself is bullishly flexing its global muscles, having hosted, for one, the New Cities Summit in 2014.

The Dallas Museum of Art recently concluded an internationally acclaimed exhibition put together by British-born curator Gavin Delahunty ("Jackson Pollock: Blind Spots"). And the Nasher Sculpture Center earlier this month awarded its first Nasher Prize for Sculpture to Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, who flew from Bogotá to accept the \$100,000 honor.

Byrne, whom Sughrue credits with being the art connoisseur of the two, loves what he calls the synergy of the fair. He cites the example of Dallas-based Cris Worley Fine Arts, which has a new home on Levee Street on the northern end of the Dallas Design District, getting to show off its wares next to the elite Massimo De Carlo gallery, with galleries in Milan and London.

“That’s unique, and the audience picks up on that. It’s not pre-fab,” Byrne said. “It’s a roots-up thing, and I’m very proud of that.”

Byrne grew up in Philadelphia, Sughrue in Boston, a pair of Ivy League-schooled hockey buffs from Irish Catholic families, a bond that helped foster a lasting friendship. Both have lived in Dallas more than 20 years. Byrne graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. Sughrue, whose pedigree includes degrees from Harvard and Dartmouth, said he noticed for the first time last year how dramatically the fair and its host city have changed. He recalls walking around the Dallas Contemporary during Art Fair week “hearing so many different languages ... Japanese, German, French, Spanish, English ... It made me feel that what we’ve experienced during my 25 years here is Dallas becoming one of the more important American cities. It’s now becoming both an international city and an international art destination. We’re not selling hope any longer.”

Sughrue sees art fairs as an extension of a cultural and “city-building” mission, as do many cities, hence their explosive growth the last few years. But art fairs are not immune from criticism. Both artists and critics have spoken out about the trend. Unlike a museum, the mission of an art fair is to sell.

Dallas artist Pamela Nelson unveiled a show in 2014 titled “The Pink Bazaar.” She dolled up the Dragon Street space of Craighead Green Gallery, which represents her, to look like a booth at an art fair. Nelson, a former artist-in-residence at the Fairmont Dallas, is not a fan of art fairs.

“We spend our lives dedicated to this,” said Nelson, who counts among her closest friends former President George W. Bush and her childhood chum from their years growing up in Midland, former first lady Laura Bush.

“It’s not merchandise,” Nelson said. “I make my living with art, so I understand we have to sell it, but I don’t like to be there when it’s happening. That’s why I pay a gallery to represent me. So, when you see it all there, on the meat-market floor, it’s just really discouraging.”

Nelson has attended the Dallas Art Fair, Art Basel, art fairs in New York, “because I like to go see other people’s works. But seeing patrons kind of rush around, almost competing to get the same things ... I know it can help artists. I really do. It’s not that it’s all bad. But for me to go? It’s hard to see it.”

Jerry Saltz, senior art critic and columnist for *New York* magazine, is even more pointed in his criticism. He once called art fairs “adrenaline-addled spectacles ... perfect storms of money, marketability and instant gratification ... tent-city casinos.” He now has a slightly different perspective, as he writes on the website Artnet: “They still drive me crazy and wear me out, but now I see them for what they’ve always been: Big sleepover parties where people sniff each other’s scents and make connections in a hurry. Artists get a chance to make a little money, and critics — almost by accident — get to see galleries we might not otherwise have a chance to visit.”

But Sughrue and Byrne say the fair is about so much more than selling. They see it as having a civic-minded, philanthropic side that is reaching a peak with the 2016 edition. Its educational outreach includes numerous panel discussions, seminars and tours, but its biggest announcement by far is its partnership with the Dallas Museum of Art, with which it is sharing a new creation: The Dallas Art Fair Foundation Acquisition Program. Officials for both the fair and the DMA say the program, whose initial \$50,000 is funded by five couples and the Dallas Art Fair Foundation, will provide the museum “with the means to acquire work by artists” exhibited at the Dallas Art Fair.

Delahunty, the DMA’s senior curator of contemporary art — who brought the acclaimed Pollock exhibition to Dallas — has selected the artworks to be acquired from the fair. The official announcement will take place at the Dallas Art Fair press preview on Thursday.

The Dallas Art Fair came about, Sughrue said, only because he and Byrne were “selfishly interested” in attending an art fair in their adopted home. They have yet to welcome 100 galleries, but it isn’t because they don’t want to.

Fashion Industry Gallery will simply not accommodate quite that many. The founders say they don’t receive commissions but do concede that sales have risen dramatically as the fair has grown. What they do receive, they say, are rental fees ranging between \$10,500 and \$30,000 per booth. Sughrue says attendance has grown from 3,500 attendees in 2009 to the current “10,000-plus.” And you’ll see some well-known faces in the crowd. This year’s exhibitors include Santa Fe-based James Kelly Contemporary, which is bringing actor-artist Val Kilmer to Dallas.

So, everyone keeps asking: When will you move to a larger location? They concede that moving is possible, just not yet.

Byrne says the fair has helped Dallas-based artists heighten their international stature. One, he says, is Nathan Green, represented by Dallas' Barry Whistler Gallery. Green has shown his artwork at a show in London, fueled by exposure at the Dallas Art Fair. Byrne also applauds the ricochet effect created by the fair, whose events coincide with major happenings at Dallas Contemporary, the Nasher, the DMA and the Goss-Michael Foundation, which has unveiled an exhibition by elite artist Paula Crown and staged its annual MTV Re:Define event the weekend before the fair. The same day as the fair, the DMA will open yet another acclaimed show, "Irving Penn: Beyond Beauty," extolling the work of one of America's great photographers.

Sughrue said he recently spoke to the Harvard Club of Dallas, just as he did five years ago. He told the audience that, during that time, much has changed.

"To find your place on the global art fair calendar at this point in time is incredibly difficult to do," he said. "The world has woken up to recognizing that these art fairs are an amazing opportunity to develop an international platform and reputation — for your city." There are now, he said, more than 160 art fairs "competing for attention internationally," but, he contends, "there is no better discourse than what we have going on right now in Dallas, Texas. It's stunning, and it's remarkable, and it's appreciated around the world. I joke sometimes that it's not appreciated maybe as much as it could be, however, in our own backyard."

What's most distinctive about the Dallas Art Fair, Sughrue said, "is Dallas itself. The city has really come of age. We're not trying to be L.A. We're not trying to be New York. We're just authentically Dallas." He cites the city's cultural offerings "and everything from our restaurants to our museums to the hospitality of our people to the multitude of things you can find to do here."

Or, as Sughrue says his friend, restaurateur Stephan Pyles, is fond of saying, "We have finally become the city that we always said we were."

<https://www.dallasnews.com/arts/arts/2016/04/08/eight-years-in-dallas-art-fair-reaches-a-n-international-peak>