

More Incarnations Than Dr. Who: Expo Chicago 2015

BY DEVEN GOLDEN SEPTEMBER 23, 2015

Four years into its latest iteration under the management of Tony Karman, what is there to say about Chicago Expo?

Let's start with the art, which was wide ranging and of consistent high quality. Naturally, Chicago galleries were present in force and brought along some of the more pleasant surprises. For instance, at Richard Norton, two paintings by the hermetic Chicago painter Gertrude Abercrombie, notably *Broken Limb* (c. 1940). Corbett vs Dempsey, a gallery whose programming grows more interesting with each passing year, shared a booth with New York's David Nolan Gallery, which allowed them to pair two Jim Nutt drawings across from Karl Wirsum's painting *Count Fasco's Mouse Piece Whitey Jr. #2* (1983). In the Exposure section for smaller galleries, the one-year old Regards Gallery featured work by Megan Greene.

With the high cost of participation, there can be an understandable tendency in art fairs for galleries to spread their risk with overly wide selections of materials. This can easily lead to a kind of visual overload, where you see so much that you wind up remembering very little. Happily, to make a more forceful presentation perhaps, quite a number of booths at Chicago Expo showcased a single artist's work. Flowers Gallery (London and New York), for instance, featured a notable mini-retrospective of Richard Smith, highlighting works from his "Kite" series, and created an invitation-sized catalog with essay especially for it. Galerie Zürcher, with venues in Paris and New York, featured a solo show of Cordy Ryman's funky painted 2x4 sculptures and wall pieces that stood out for being so raw in a sea of polish. On Stellar Rays, out of New York's Lower Eastside, focused on J.J. Peet, whose paintings, drawings, and a sculpture are so diverse they could be mistaken for a group installation. One of his paintings went on to be selected for the Northern Trust Arts Club of Chicago Purchase Prize. And Garth Greenen Gallery out of New York devoted his entire space to only three jewel-like paintings, each not much bigger than a sheet of notebook paper, by Victoria Gitman.

The professionalism, range, and quality of the galleries no doubt owed something to the selection committee, which included not only some of the heavy weight gallerists that one might expect—Marianne Boesky, David Zwirner, David Nolan, Rhona Hoffman, Isabella Bortolozzi—but also younger visionaries such as Jessica Silverman, Suzanne Vielmetter, John Corbett (Corbett vs Dempsey), and Candice Madey (On Stellar Rays). The result was a happy mix of blue chip, mid-range, and emerging dealers from 16 countries.

The art was good, then, and so too the venue. The large hall at the end of Navy Pier provided a friendly and vastly superior art viewing space than the slightly claustrophobic Merchandise Mart space that hosted previous fairs. The layout of the booths was generous and intelligent with wide, easy-to-navigate aisles. And Jason Pickelman's JNL Graphics, the design team that gave the distinctive look to Chicago Art Expo during its heyday in the '90s, was once again in charge of the Expo's image where a clean, professional atmosphere prevailed.

This is all welcome news for an art fair that has gone through as many incarnations as Dr. Who. It's hard to remember now, but for a long time in the 80s, the fair started by John Wilson to mirror Art Basel was the most important art fair in the Western Hemisphere. Reformulated by Thomas Blackman (who had been the director of the fair under Wilson) its dominance continued into the late '90s even as competitors emerged. But it stumbled as it entered the 21st Century, at one point with three competing fairs fighting for dominance, this at the same time that New York, and then Miami, began to become major venues. Moreover, when the first Chicago art fair opened in 1980, it was at the geographic center, literally, for American collectors who were also the major buyers. This is no longer the case; art collecting is international, with major collectors in London, Moscow, Dubai, and other world financial capitals flying from continent to continent to attend the 200 art fairs currently hosted annually. It is a long way to Chicago from Shanghai, or Abu Dhabi.

Chicago very much wants to host a world-class art fair. Tony Karman and his team, along with the selection committee, have worked very hard to give them one. The galleries came and brought the art. But it is yet to be decided if collectors can once again think of Chicago Expo as a must-see destination.