

ARTINFO

“Intimately Scaled” Pulse Looks Promising

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LONDON—The Pulse fair’s first London foray started out auspiciously, but by the afternoon—when the Zoo Art Fair’s VIP preview began over at the Royal Academy—things had slowed down considerably, causing some dealers to fidget in their booths.

The morning rush at Pulse was made considerably classier by the hangover-friendly brunch (perfect for those partying the night before), which featured waiters circulating with trays of mimosas and Bloody Marys. Early-bird arrivals at the fair included Todd Levin, curator for New York hedge-fund honcho Adam Sender’s collection, as well as noted Chinese contemporary collector Howard Farber, some of whose collection goes up for sale at Phillips this week. (Farber says he is now concentrating on contemporary Cuban art.)

At the brunch, collectors, advisors and various other VIP-types rubbed shoulders with weary journalists. Over paper cups of coffee, a man was describing the fair to his friend, who had just arrived: “This fair is more decorative. Its perfect if you are buying art for an office.”

Whether the comment was meant derogatorily aside, it didn’t ring true upon inspection of the booths, which featured work that was not just aesthetically pleasing but thought-provoking and in some cases provocative. The assessment points more to where Pulse positions itself vis-à-vis the Frieze fair and the other satellites. Whereas some fairs cultivate a flashy image, Pulse seems almost willfully modest. This is to its credit. It’s a friendly fair, and one that presents art in a respectful way. But all that having been said, did it generate sufficient buzz in London?

By most reports, sales were swift after the opening bell at 10 a.m. On the first floor of the fair, Chicago dealer Monique Meloche says she saw nonstop activity in her booth in the morning, while in a neighboring booth, fellow Chicago dealer Rhona Hoffman parted with a stunning new work by Mickalene Thomas. The European collector who bought it, for a cool €35,000 (\$50,000), had made a mad dash to her stand. Thomas’s work has become highly desirable, and Hoffman is adamant about not pre-selling work. “If you do that, new collectors don’t have a chance,” she insists.

Upstairs, Austin, Texas, dealer Lora Reynolds’ booth was dominated by a clever antiwar work by Jim Torok, and by afternoon she saw multiple sales. **Across the aisle from her was**

D.C. gallery Conner Contemporary, whose artist Eric Sandberg made a brief appearance in the booth, standing in front of his wildly imaginative figurative drawings, which often feature outsized nudes in bizarre scenarios and were priced at \$2,500 a piece. His work, firmly in the grotesque tradition, is a highlight of this fair.

Some dealers, including New York's Jack Shainman, are installed in individual rooms, which is a nice touch and an effective antidote for art-fair distraction.

Shainman's booth is elegantly installed with works by gallery mainstays Kerry James Marshall, Jonathan Seliger, and others. "There were more Americans than I thought there would be," he said, reporting visits from collectors including New Yorkers Joel and Sherry Mallin and Eileen Cohen. Sales at the booth prove Pulse collectors aren't shying away from higher prices: Shainman's artists, with solid five-figure prices, are among the more expensive at the fair, but he made quick work of selling pieces by Marshall and Seliger, as well as ones by Claudette Schreuders.

Meanwhile, White Space, the recently established Beijing branch of Berlin-based Alexander Ochs gallery, was doing brisk business in contemporary Chinese art. A set of five photographs from 2002 of swimmers in a Chinese river by Yin Xiuzhen, whose work is currently in the Chinese pavilion at the Venice Biennale, went for £20,700 (\$42,000). A large, new, brightly colored painting by Wang Mai sold for €45,000, and the gallery parted with a number of paintings and bronze sculptures of contorted faces by Fang Lijun, one of the hottest Chinese artists on the market. Still available was perhaps the most disturbing work in the fair (to this viewer's eyes, anyway)—a plastic tube filled with what appear to be curled-up fetuses. The work, priced at €55,000 and in an edition of two, leaned inconspicuously in a corner of the booth.

If Pulse has a drawback, it is that its site, the historic Mary Ward House, where Year_06 Art Projects took place last year, presents some of the cramped, labyrinthine atmosphere of the old beer hall that houses the Liste fair in Basel. But this is a first-year effort, and first years can be tricky.

For her part, Pulse director Helen Allen was pleased with how things were going. She was happy to have seen collectors like Anita Zabłudowicz and curators like Donna De Salvo. "We present a more intimately scaled show with a broader range," she points out. Its true, and it's a good addition in London.